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Kabul–Kandahar Dynamic

Myth, Reality and the Future of Taliban Cohesion

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VIF BRIEF

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Introduction

Since the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, speculations regarding the emerging complexities within their administration have caught the attention of media and policy circles as well as the academic community. There is a rising belief that the Taliban leadership in the past four years appears to be divided between Kandahar and Kabul groups, and that the increasing differences between them are likely to be one of the reasons for a possible rift within the organization.[1]

In this VIF Brief, an effort will be made to understand the presence of internal divisions within the Taliban-led administration/leadership, while analysing whether the *Kabul-Kandahar divide* is a 'myth' or a 'reality.' Accordingly, the paper is divided into the following sections: the organizational structure of the Taliban and the Council of Ministers in Taliban 2.0; Kabul and Kandahar divisions; the Emir's political ambitions in consolidating power in Kandahar; internal cohesion as a strategic compulsion for the Taliban; and the myth and reality of the Kabul-Kandahar divide.

Organizational Structure of the Taliban

The Taliban movement combines both horizontal and vertical structures, and its centralizing nature, characterized by a supra-tribal and supra-ethnic identity under Islam, represents the vertical aspect.[2] The local leadership's relative autonomy in their operations reflects the horizontal structure,

resulting in a degree of decentralization within the group.[3] The Taliban leadership's recruitment occurs through three main networks: religious, political, and tribal.[4] The organization's solidarity is reinforced by the *andiwal* networks, which involve patron-client relationships, kinship ties, tribal connections, and personal loyalties.[5] Furthermore, membership in the Taliban is also based on the circumstances surrounding tactical and strategic goals.[6] For instance, the Taliban's close relationship with Al-Qaeda and their association with members of the Haqqani Network (HN)—have been part of both tactical and strategic interests. Historically, the Taliban's central leadership has been dominated by leaders from Afghanistan's southern provinces, especially Kandahar, from where the group emerged in the 1990s, and which remains the epicentre of power for the Taliban 2.0.[7] It has been observed that within the administration, in addition to the position of the supreme leader, other key ministries were led by senior officials from southern provinces like Kandahar and Helmand. However, in Taliban 2.0, there have been some modifications to the power structure (not exclusive to the top leadership), with members of the HN from Afghanistan's eastern provinces occupying some of the important ministries, alongside the Kandhari faction of the Taliban. The distribution of authority between leaders from southern and eastern Afghanistan, including northern and central provinces, has prompted questions about divergences in operational strategies—and differences that could undermine the Taliban's unity and cohesion in the future.

The following sections examine the distribution of power within the Taliban's central leadership, necessary to understand the Kabul–Kandahar dynamic and evaluate the presence of any internal power struggle between them.

Taliban 2.0: Mapping the Central Leadership and Power Structure

From its formation, the Taliban has operated as a hierarchical organization centred on the authority of the *Amir ul-Mu'minin* (widely known as the Emir or Supreme Leader). It is often believed that divine and God-given

authority rests with the Emir, and each member of the group has to make *bayah* (an Islamic practice in which an individual swears an oath of allegiance to a leader) to him.[8] In fact, after the death of the Taliban's first supreme leader, Mullah Omar, the organization's revival and its eventual successes, especially during the period of insurgency—all depended on the *doctrine of obedience*[9] to all the succeeding Emirs, through the command chain leading up to the supreme leader.[10] From 2001 (when the Taliban were ousted from power) to 2021 (when the group retook power in Kabul), they not just withstood time but revived with the help of different leadership councils (*Shuras*) in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and also Iran—many of which were then headed by current leaders from the Taliban government. These Shuras were not necessarily under the control of the Kandhari faction of the Taliban alone; the *Miran Shah Shura* was exclusively composed of leaders from the Haqqani Network.

To understand the Central Leadership and the distribution of power/ authority under the Taliban 2.0, the following *Table 1 highlights the current Council of Ministers.*

Source: ***The Middle East Institute***[11]

The table above shows the Taliban's *Council of Ministers* (the government's top executive and administrative body which includes the Prime Minister, deputies, the cabinet, and other ministers, who collectively manage government institutions and oversee the implementation of the

Taliban's laws and regulations).[12] It also mentions the names of prominent Taliban leaders from the current administration, heading important and controversial ministries in the Cabinet.

Before discussing the Kandahar-Kabul divide within the Taliban, which is central to this paper, the following section will provide a brief profile of the above-mentioned Taliban leaders from the current regime—focusing on their ethnic and regional identities, current positions, including past contributions to Afghanistan's forty years of war. *Javid Ahmad's* (Fellow at the Middle East Institute) published work, *Introducing the Taliban Leadership Tracker*,[13] has been extensively used as a key reference to provide detailed information on the Taliban leaders.

Brief Profile of the Taliban 2.0 Leaders

1. Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada

Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, an *ethnic Pashtun* from the Panjwai district in *southern Kandahar* province, is the third and current Supreme Leader of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate –a position which he has held since 2016. He is from the Noorzai tribe of the Pashtuns. During the mujahedeen resistance (1979-1989), Akhundzada fought alongside Haji Mohammad Akhund and the Hezb-e-Islami group, led by Mawlawi Mohammad Younus Khalis. However, after 2001, he dedicated himself to religious scholarship and later assumed influential roles, including serving as a judge and heading the Taliban's judiciary during the period of insurgency. While serving as the group's top clerical authority, he was responsible for issuing fatwas that legitimized the use of suicide attacks during war. Since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, the Supreme Leader has issued more than 550 directives—mostly religious mandates, guiding Islamic governance and rights of women. He remains reclusive, with no public or virtual presence, and tries to reinstate a divine authority. The Emir is not listed on any international sanctions' lists.[14]

2. Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund

Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, an ethnic *Pashtun* from the Panjwai district of *southern Afghanistan*, is the Prime Minister of the current administration and the head of the Council of Ministers. He belongs to the Babar tribe of the Pashtuns. The Taliban leader has been one of the founding figures of the movement and was a close confidant and advisor to Mullah Omar. He also participated in the mujahideen resistance as part of the Hezb-e-Islami (Khalis) group, and in the later years, is notably remembered for supporting the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas. During the Taliban's first Islamic Emirate (1996–2001), he held significant positions—as first deputy of the Council of Ministers, Foreign Minister, and governor of Kandahar. He gained prominence for his refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden in the late 1990s and is currently sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council.[15]

3. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar

Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, an ethnic *Pashtun* from the Dehrawud district in Uruzgan province, *central Afghanistan*, has been serving as the Taliban's Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs and head of the Economic Commission since the group's return to power in 2021. He was one of the founding members of the Taliban movement alongside Mullah Omar. Before joining the Taliban, he served as a mujahideen fighter against the Soviet forces, working closely with the Harakat-e-Inqilabi Islami group led by Mawlawi Mohammad Nabi Mohammadi. Baradar served as the Deputy Minister of Defense during the first Islamic Emirate. After 2001, he also led the Taliban's negotiating team in Doha, Qatar, for the Peace Talks with the United States—thereby, playing a pivotal role in securing the 2020 U.S.-Taliban Doha agreement that facilitated the U.S. and NATO troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, Mullah Baradar remains on one of the United Nations sanction lists.[16]

4. Mullah Abdul Salam Hanafi

Mullah Abdul Salam Hanafi is the senior-most *ethnic Uzbek* leader in the Taliban's Council of Ministers, coming from the Darzab district in Jawzjan province, *northern Afghanistan*. He currently serves as the Deputy Prime Minister for Administrative Affairs in the Taliban government. Hanafi has held a range of political positions within the Taliban leadership, both during the group's first Islamic Emirate and throughout the insurgency. In the 1990s, he was the deputy education minister, and after 2001, he was primarily involved in narcotics trafficking in northern Jawzjan. From 2019 to 2021, Hanafi played a prominent role in the Taliban's Doha negotiations, serving as the group's deputy head of its political office in Qatar. Like several other Taliban leaders, he continues to be sanctioned by the United States, the United Kingdom, and the United Nations.[17]

5. Mawlawi Abdul Kabir

Mawlawi Abdul Kabir, also known as Haji Mawin, is a Taliban leader who does not come from the group of traditional Kandhari Durrani Pashtun leaders. He is from the Neka district in *Paktia* province, *eastern Afghanistan*, and is a member of the *Zadran tribe* of the Pashtuns. Abdul Kabir, who is closely linked to the *Haqqani Network*, is currently the Acting Minister of Refugees and Repatriation. Kabir was also part of the mujahideen resistance, fighting alongside Jalaluddin Haqqani, the founder of the HN. During the Taliban's first Emirate, he served as the deputy head of the Council of Ministers, managing the political affairs of the eastern region, as governor of Nangarhar province. During the insurgency, Kabir was involved in business activities, primarily controlling smuggling routes in the east of Afghanistan, thereby significantly contributing to reviving the Taliban. He was reportedly engaged in corruption and money laundering, all of which helped to fund and sustain the Taliban's resurgence. Additionally, he remains sanctioned by the UN Security Council.[18]

6. Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob Mujahid

Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob Mujahid is the Minister of National Defense in the Taliban government and is from the Maiwand district in *Kandahar* province, *southern Afghanistan*. He is the eldest son of Mullah Mohammad Omar, the Taliban's first supreme leader, and belongs to the *Hotak tribe* of the Pashtuns. Widely known as the "young mullah," Yaqoob has played significant roles during the Taliban's shadow government, particularly from 2016 to 2021. During this period, he served as one of the two deputy emirs alongside Sirajuddin Haqqani, where he was responsible for overseeing the Taliban's military operations in 15 provinces. Further, he also held the position of head of the Taliban's military commission until the group's takeover in 2021. However, Mullah Yaqoob is not listed in the United Nations and other sanction lists.[19]

7. Mawlawi Habibullah Agha

Mawlawi Habibullah Agha is a prominent Pashtun cleric and is the Minister of Education in the Taliban-led government. He has been a trusted confidante to the Emir and is often seen promoting his extreme religious ideas. He is from the Arghandab district of the *Kandahar* province, *southern Afghanistan*. Before becoming the education minister, he was the provincial head of the Taliban's clerical council in Kandahar. After completing his graduation from the *Darul Uloom Haqqania* madrassah in Pakistan, he joined the Taliban movement shortly after the group came to power in 1994-1996 and served as the head of the Punishment Diwan in the Primary Court in Kandahar. After 2001, he became the legal adjudicator for four years in the Taliban's shadow Court of Arbitration in western Farah province in Afghanistan. Thereafter, he became the deputy head of administration at the Central Dar-ul-Ifta—the main legal body overseeing religious rulings and fatwas.[20]

8. Khalifa Sirajuddin Haqqani

Khalifa Sirajuddin Haqqani, currently the Minister of Interior in the Taliban government, has led the Haqqani Network since Jalaluddin Haqqani's demise in 2018. Unlike many traditional Kandahari Taliban elites, Sirajuddin is from the Zadran district of *Paktika* province in *eastern Afghanistan* and belongs to the *Zadran tribe* of the Pashtuns. The Taliban leader spent much of his youth in Miran Shah, North Waziristan, Pakistan. As the Minister of Interior, he is responsible for overseeing the country's police forces and specialized units, while exerting influence in the government's senior councils, and further being involved in appointing governors in eastern Afghanistan. During the insurgency, Sirajuddin managed the military operations in Afghanistan's southeastern provinces (for example, Khost). He soon became prominent within the Taliban's rank and file, becoming one of two deputy emirs in 2016 under Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, all while leading the HN.[21]

9. Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi

Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, an ethnic *Pashtun* from the Nad-e-Ali district in *Helmand province, southern Afghanistan*, is the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Taliban-led government. He held numerous key roles in the Taliban's first Islamic Emirate and throughout the insurgency. Between 1996 and 2001, Muttaqi served as the head of Kandahar Radio, Director of Information and Culture in Kandahar, Minister of Information and Culture, Chief of Staff at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Minister of Education. After 2001, he continued to hold influential positions, including as a member of the Taliban's cultural commission and was also part of the Political Office and Negotiation Team in Doha. Before the Taliban's 2021 takeover, he was chief of staff to Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada and oversaw the group's recruitment commissions.[22]

10. Sheikh Abdul Hakim Haqqani

Sheikh Abdul Hakim Haqqani is the Chief Justice of the Taliban's Supreme Court. As one of the founding figures of the Taliban movement, he is from the *Kandahar* province, *southern* Afghanistan, and is regarded as the most influential religious leader within the organization. Once considered close to Mullah Omar, Sheikh Haqqani remains a key mentor to many senior Taliban leaders, including the present Emir. He has played a pivotal role in shaping the Taliban's religious framework by promoting Islamic policies. As a graduate of the *Darul Uloom Haqqania* madrassah in Pakistan, he headed the Taliban's judicial commission and ran a madrassah in Balochistan, Pakistan. He is credited with writing the book *The Islamic Emirate and its System*—outlining the political philosophy behind Taliban governance. The book has received the approval of the Supreme Leader, whose actions have strengthened the authority of the Supreme Court and the Chief Justice on matters of religious doctrine—a shift that became evident in 2022 after the Taliban restructured the judiciary, merging the Supreme Court with the General Directorate of Rights and creating provincial Houses of Fatwa.[23]

11. Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai

Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, a Pashtun (from the Stanekzai tribe), is from the Barak district in *Logar* province, *eastern Afghanistan*. He was a former mujahideen fighter who was sent to India by Sardar Mohammad Daud Khan for his military education. He graduated from the Indian Military Academy in Dehradun in 1981, and returning to Kabul, he joined the mujahideen resistance. During the early phase of the Afghan jihad, he aligned with Nabi Mohammadi's Harakat-e-Inqilab-e-Islami party, later moving to Abd al-Rasul Sayyaf's Ittehad-e-Islami party, where he commanded the southwestern resistance front. Stanekzai became Deputy Foreign Minister and later Deputy Health Minister during the Taliban's first Islamic Emirate. Since 2001, he has served in

the Taliban's political commission, and between August 2015 and January 2019, he became the head of the political office. After August 2021, Stanekzai served as the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs from 7 September 2021 to 27 January 2025.[24]

The above-mentioned Taliban leaders have played a central role in shaping the group's ideologies and interpretations regarding Islamic jurisprudence, guiding its strategic and security policies, and influencing its stance on women's rights. From this, it can be inferred that personal and professional identities reflect the presence of two distinct factions within the Taliban's present leadership—the *Kandhari elites* and the *Eastern Pashtuns*, though in perspective. Although these two groups need not necessarily constitute a 'regional divide' within the organization, they nonetheless highlight existing differences in matters related to governance style, ideological preferences, and operational strategies.

The following section will discuss the Kabul and Kandahar factions in the Taliban 2.0.

The Kabul and the Kandahar Divide

The Taliban has remained a cohesive organization, exhibiting both centralizing and decentralizing features. However, after the Taliban came to power in 2021, there were reports of growing discontent between leaders from Kandahar or south of Afghanistan and those from the east, central, and north of the country, causing internal divisions within the organization.

The *Kandahar Circle* comprises key Taliban leaders who are primarily from Kandahar, Helmand, and other southern provinces of Afghanistan. This group of Kandhari elites comprises lawmakers from the so-called "Greater Kandahar" and belongs to the Durrani tribal confederation of southern Pashtuns.[25] The Emir is mostly from Kandahar, which is not only the birthplace and the spiritual home of the Taliban movement but also remains the centre of gravity for the group.[26] The Emir, who resides in Kandahar, is accompanied by his close associates from the southern provinces who were also the founding members of the Taliban. He and

his small inner circle of religious leaders and supporters, together, are all referred to as the *Kandhari Taliban*.[27]

Table 1 highlights that the supreme leader, the prime minister, the education minister, and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court form the group of elite Taliban leaders from Kandahar who are often seen making the primary decisions and issuing directives to the people. One of the significant features of these leaders is that they were all mujahedeen fighters, who participated in the resistance movement against the Soviet Union. Furthermore, they played crucial roles in establishing the Taliban's ideological foundation. The Emir's religious scholarship allowed him to lead the group's clerical council and take part in issuing fatwas when the Taliban functioned as a shadow government (2001-2021). Similarly, his other close associates—Habibullah Agha (Minister of Education) and Sheikh Abdul Hakim Haqqani (Chief Justice) have been part of the clerical council of the Taliban in Kandahar and other religious and judicial commissions. This group of Taliban leaders presented themselves as custodians of Afghanistan's religion and culture, aiming to replicate something similar to what existed during the Taliban's first regime—a rigid and orthodox version of Islamic law.

Besides them, some Taliban leaders from southern Afghanistan, like Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, appeared to have *moderate* worldviews, especially during the Doha Peace Process negotiations with the Western world.[28] The promptness shown toward bringing reforms, dialogue, and inclusivity led the international community to term them as part of the 'moderate Taliban'. However, in the present political scenario, it appears nothing more than a narrative building, taking into account the group's gender-bias norms, with the only real change under Taliban 2.0 being observed in their technological know-how.[29]

The *Kabul Circle*, on the other hand, consists of the new generation of Taliban leaders whose roles/ activities gained prominence during the period of insurgency. This group is mainly dominated by the eastern Pashtuns, especially from the 'Loya Paktia'[30] region, east of Afghanistan. These eastern Pashtuns are representatives of the Ghilzay confederation of

the Pashtuns and belong to the Zadran tribe.[31] The leaders of the Haqqani Network are an integral part of this faction within the Taliban.[32] This group of leaders appears strategic and pragmatic, and following the US intervention in 2001, their focus was on regaining power in Kabul. In a bid to revive the Taliban, they were keen to negotiate on traditional values and incorporate a degree of moderation into the group's hardline ideologies, at least in the domain of technological advancement.[33] Furthermore, they exhibit some level of flexibility in terms of their interactions with the international community. International Media has termed Sirajuddin Haqqani—an important figure within this group—to be a pragmatic statesman, a reliable diplomat, and a voice of relative moderation in the Taliban government that is steeped in religious extremism.[34] He is being referred to as a strategic realist after he privately lobbied for girls to be allowed to return to school beyond the sixth grade and for women to resume work in government offices.[35] Such differences in perspective have placed Sirajuddin and other leaders of the HN as opposed to the Emir on various fronts—complicating the relations between Kabul and the Kandahar Taliban circles. Meanwhile, Mohammad Yaqoub and Abdul Ghani Baradar, despite similar Kandhari roots, have also largely disagreed with some of the Emir's policies. These leaders together constitute the *Kabul Taliban* faction, which often overlaps with the Haqqani Network.[36]

Despite ideological and strategic differences, the Taliban maintains its cohesive identity, carefully utilizing both its religious and ethnic commonalities.[37] None of the Taliban leaders since 2021 has openly accepted the existence of any regional circle within the leadership. However, time and again, leaders like Sirajuddin and Stanekzai have expressed reservations about the Emir's views on the rights of women in Afghanistan, but this does not necessarily contribute to a major rift within the organization.

However, it is also important to understand that since the group came to power in 2021, the Emir's political ambitions of consolidating power in Kandahar have undoubtedly heightened internal tensions within the Taliban leadership—deepening the existing ideological and policy differences among its factions.

The Emir's Political Ambitions: Consolidating Power in Kandahar

The Taliban's Supreme Leader, or Amir ul-Mu'minin (Commander of the Faithful), is the highest authority in the Emirate's power structure, and his orders/directives carry the force of law. Since there is no parliament or legislative body under the Islamic Emirate, executive and judicial powers are under the exclusive purview of the Emir, which gives him the authority to pass and sign decrees.[38] There is a widespread belief that God works through the person of the Emir, and therefore, obedience to him is equated with submission to the Prophet.[39] Such a belief positions the Emir as the unquestioned leader with divine powers. Mullah Omar's initial visit to the Shrine of the Prophet Mohamad's sacred Cloak (his ancient robe) in 1996 reinforced the idea of divine incarnation.[40] It was not until then that Mullah Omar displayed it to a crowd in Kandahar, which is considered a turning point in his claim to supreme leadership."[41] Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, the succeeding Taliban Emir (2015-2016), was unable to position himself with the same power and authority, as he lacked personal influence and valour, unlike his predecessor. After his death, Hibatullah Akhundzada was considerably successful in earning some level of loyalty and obedience in the organization (from other leaders and foot soldiers) as the Emir since 2016.[42]

Since the Taliban's return to power, it can be observed that Hibatullah is adopting different measures to consolidate political power in Kandahar and over the regime's decision-making body. Accordingly, he has been shifting authority from Kabul to Kandahar, and in doing so, has appointed loyalists such as Mawlawi Habibullah Agha, Abdul Hakim Haqqani (who share his outlook and consistently reinforce his views, particularly on religious matters), to undertake key government positions.[43] In April 2023, in an attempt to shift the power base,[44] he forced the Taliban spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, along with his deputy Innamullah Samangani,[45] to work from both Kandahar and Kabul.[46] Furthermore, there are also reports claiming that after the takeover, the Taliban's cabinet meetings that were initially held in Kabul were soon shifted to Kandahar, only to be conducted

directly under the supervision of the Emir—starting as early as 2022.[47] Additionally, to tighten his grip on the power structure, Akhundzada ordered that the cabinet should be reshuffled with new appointees, mainly from among his close confidants. For instance, in September 2022, Education Minister Noorullah Munir was replaced by Mawlawi Habibullah Agha, a trusted ally of the supreme leader.[48] Similarly, in May 2024, Health Minister Qalandar Ebad, a trained doctor and the only technocrat in the Taliban government, was replaced by Noor Jalal, a hardline cleric and former deputy interior minister.[49]

Moreover, to ensure that Taliban leaders abide by his rules, the Emir has empowered a small group of ultraconservative religious leaders, mainly from Kandahar, who help enforce his policies.[50] Accordingly, in 2022, Akhundzada created provincial religious councils to monitor Taliban officials and oversee the proper implementation of his decrees.[51] At the 2022 Assembly of the Ulema Conference in Kabul, he made an unusual public appearance, addressing religious leaders and elders with anecdotes—urging unquestioned obedience to his authority.[52] He made several revelations from history on the responsibilities of religious leaders in persuading the Afghan population to agree and to abide by his edicts.[53] Several reports claim that in order to secure a total allegiance from Taliban officials, the Emir transformed the Attorney General's Office of Afghanistan into a competent institution under his direct command after changing it from a judicial institution to a supervisory office.[54] The Attorney General's Office, which is now called the *Chief Directorate for Supervising and Prosecuting the Decrees*, is responsible for ensuring the implementation of the Supreme Leader's decrees, issuing arrest warrants, overseeing detention facilities, facilitating the transfer of prisoners from abroad to Afghanistan, and managing the extradition of suspects.[55] The new department holds the power to both monitor and prosecute Taliban officials within the Defense and Interior Ministries, including the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI).[56]

Apparently, all these developments indicate the Emir's repeated efforts to centralize his authority and restrict dissent coming from Taliban leaders

and the Afghan population. Despite strict adherence to the Emir, there have been reports that Sirajuddin Haqqani and other leaders from the HN are expressing dissatisfaction over some of his directives, especially those concerning the rights of Afghan women.[57] Addressing a religious gathering in Khost, Sirajuddin Haqqani, in 2023, without naming anyone, mentioned, "Monopolising power and hurting the reputation of the entire system are not to our benefit…and the situation cannot be tolerated."[58] Referring to Sirajuddin's remarks, *Rahmatullah Andar*, the former spokesman of the National Security Council, said that the leader of the HN implied Hibatullah was monopolizing power and imposing his thoughts on the people, which would lead to the defamation of the system.[59]

Realizing the growing resentment among some of the leaders of the HN (who head the Afghan Ministry of Interior and are responsible for law enforcement and maintaining security in the country), the Emir is developing a security force loyal to him.[60] By doing so, he is building his own security apparatus separate from those that report to the Defense Ministry, thereby deepening his centralization of power.[61] He has created a 40,000-person army, separate from the Taliban military and police, which is formed exclusively in Kandahar and consists of his relatives, dependents, and close advisers.[62] This independent and separate military unit in Kandahar indicates disparities between different factions of the Taliban and the emerging conflicts with the Supreme Leader.[63]

The Emir's efforts to consolidate power in Kandahar may yield political advantages and strengthen the group's internal cohesion by centralizing and monopolizing authority and limiting dissent. However, this approach risks provoking future conflict with the Kabul Taliban, who appear increasingly dissatisfied with the Supreme Leader on matters of governance, administration, ideology, and foreign policy. Attempts by certain Taliban figures, including Haqqani, to build ties with the international community through greater engagement, to bring in more aid, and investment to the country are being undermined by restrictive policies, such as a ban on education for Afghan girls and women and the morality laws.[64]

The following section, therefore, will explore how differences in ideology (religion and culture) and foreign policy further highlight divisions among Taliban factions, although this does not necessarily indicate a future fragmentation of the group.

Ideological and Policy Differences within the Taliban 2.0

Although ideological differences do not appear to be the major subject of disagreement between the Kabul and Kandhari factions of the Taliban 2.0, there lies a probability of growing differences between them in matters relating to varying or conflicting interpretations regarding implementing the Shari 'ah law. Before the Taliban takeover, anticipations concerning their drift towards modernity after the group participated in the Doha Peace Negotiations now appear more like a myth, considering the regime's continued harsh justice system and strictest interpretation of Islam.[65] Considering the variety of decrees passed by the Emir in the past four years, he and his close associates from Kandahar advocate the strictest and conservative understanding of Islamic law. The regime has begun imposing harsher punishments like public lashings and amputations in the name of social justice—some of which were in practice during the Taliban's first regime (1996-2001). The reinstating of the Ministry of the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice made the United Nations Human Rights groups believe that the ideological orientation of the Taliban 2.0 is reminiscent of their rule during the 1990s.[66]

The conservative interpretation of the Sharia by the Emir and other religious leaders—especially concerning the rights of women in Afghanistan—has undoubtedly created tensions between Kandhari elites and the Kabul faction.[67] Taliban leaders like Abbas Stanekzai believe that the main reason for the Afghan people's disapproval of the government is the result of the continued ban on female education; hence, the reopening of schools and universities for girls is important.[68] Sirajuddin Haqqani, Mullah Yaqoub, Mullah Baradar, and Stanekzai himself have been vocal in opposing the ban on women's education and employment opportunities, by regularly speaking on the importance of girls' education.[69] Several reports also claim that some high-ranking Taliban officials are sending their daughters to private schools in Kabul and to overseas universities, after keeping

classrooms closed for female students living inside Afghanistan.[70]

A 2022 investigation report published by the Afghanistan Analyst Network (AAN) writes on the continued classroom education of Taliban leaders' daughters:

> High-ranking officials are sending their children to overseas state schools and universities while depriving schooling to millions of girls in Afghanistan. One member of the Taliban's negotiating team in Doha said they had started to educate their children in Qatar since everybody in the neighbourhood was going to school. The daughter of one current Taliban minister and former member of the group's leadership council is studying medicine at a Qatari university. In addition, some members of the Taliban's Qatar office are said to have left their children in Doha when they returned to Kabul so that their education would not be disrupted. Taliban members and their families who live in Qatar have strong demands for modern education, and no one opposes it for either boys or girls – of any age. Further, the Iqra System (an Islamic educational system that teaches both modern school subjects and madrasa subjects) has turned out to be another good option for the Taliban, who are looking to educate their children. After the Iqra system of education was established in some cities like Karachi and Quetta in Pakistan, most of the Taliban who were looking for this kind of mixed system are finally sending their boys and girls to these schools. Moreover, Taliban officials in Afghanistan have clandestinely enrolled their daughters in private schools and universities where they take lessons in subjects considered foreign, including English and computer literacy.[71]

In another report published in early 2025, Scottish actor and a dedicated humanitarian, David Hayman, claims that Taliban members are sending their daughters to a school in Afghanistan funded by his charity organization, Spirit Aid.[72] These schools, which have been operational in Afghanistan since 2001, are now also educating the daughters of some of the Taliban leaders.[73] Such efforts by them are indicative of the fact that the Emir struggles to implement the decrees across the Taliban's rank and file, after they openly reject those restrictions and send their children (especially girls) to schools. This also reflects existing ideological differences

between different Taliban officials. However, such dichotomies need not necessarily lead to any major internal fragmentation.

Apart from the rights of women, differences of opinion between Taliban leaders have become visible in matters relating to the practice of 'polygamy', 'extra-judicial killings', and 'nepotism'.[74] On 30 May 2022, the Emir issued a decree on the 'prohibition of polygamy', where he ordered Taliban officials to take only one wife, instead of two, three, or four, terming it 'unnecessary' and 'costly'.[75] Nonetheless, many of the Taliban officials have continued to engage in multiple marriages despite the Emir's strict reservations against polygamy.[76] This decree has led to internal disgruntlement because, firstly, it does not apply to all, and many leaders from the top leadership already have multiple wives, but were seen issuing restrictions on foot soldiers and the rest. However, the reason for banning the practice is said to be the financial strain caused by traditional customs like walwar (bride prices)[77], which are either paid from the organization's funds or raised through corruption.[78]

Besides having divergent views on Islam, cultural practices, and the Shari 'ah law, Kabul and Kandhari Taliban ideologically differ from each other on governmental strategies and foreign policy approaches. Since the group came to power in 2021, the regime has been caught in a diplomatic conundrum—maintaining isolationism on the one hand and engaging bilaterally with its regional neighbours and the international community on the other.[79] Similar to the Taliban's first regime, the present Emir appears more interested in upholding a traditional, selective engagement approach in foreign policy determined by the rules of Shari 'ah.[80] The Emir, for the past four years, at every Eid celebration, has repeatedly mentioned that there was no need for Western laws in Afghanistan and that democracy was dead as long as Sharia laws are in effect.[81] In matters related to international cooperation, the Emir expressed strong opposition to any form of interaction with foreign nations, on the pretext of interference in matters relating to sovereignty and the right to practice one's culture.[82] Fearing international presence inside Afghanistan could devalue his power and position, the Emir supports promoting a 'selective engagement policy' with countries from the region and beyond by claiming that Afghanistan under the Taliban is free and independent and will not comply with any global demands.[83]

Meanwhile, Taliban officials like Sirajuddin Haqqani, Mullah Baradar, Mullah Yaqoub, and Stanekzai—all have shown readiness towards international engagements. Since 2022, these officials have made several foreign trips to regional countries in a bid to achieve political legitimacy.[84] Moreover, they have been seen expressing more pragmatic views on balancing international actors to improve the country's economic and military capabilities.[85] Members of the HN are seen utilizing their old Arab connections in bringing more investments to Afghanistan from countries in West Asia. Abu Dhabi's close relationship with Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani has helped secure a deal with the Taliban for aviation operations at Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat airports.[86] Despite competing with Qatar and Turkey, the UAE won the contract to modernize and manage airport services across Afghanistan.[87] Alongside Haqqani, Mullah Yaqoub has also made several international trips—all aimed at strengthening military and trade relations with regional countries.[88]

This dichotomy between pursuing isolationism and seeking deeper engagement with the international community can be understood as a position being upheld by two factions within the Taliban. According to Afghanistan expert Ibraheem Bahiss[89]- the non-Kandhari elites argue that restrictive decrees will hinder prospects for international recognition and limit the possibility of lifting sanctions. The Emir and his close associate, on the other hand, assert that making concessions will not improve relations with the West, and that the group should instead prioritize strengthening its Islamist credentials and consolidating its internal control.[90]

Despite these visible differences, Sami Yousafzai, a veteran Afghan journalist and commentator who has tracked the Taliban since its emergence in the 1990s, says most of the rifts within the group are merely differences of opinion and do not amount to factional infighting.[91] Since the Taliban's first Emirate in 1996, the group had largely remained unified, which continued during its 20 years of insurgency—by ignoring all the crises related to succession to the throne of the Emir and war strategies against foreign forces in Afghanistan. The rise of Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) in Afghanistan has further reinforced the Taliban's internal unity. The complex strategic and security threats posed by IS-KP are likely to push the Taliban to preserve a high degree of internal cohesion and consistency in their policies.

Internal Cohesion: A Strategic Compulsion

After waging two decades of war with the US-led NATO forces, the Taliban—now the ruling regime—fears facing internal divisions, but has deep strategic incentives to preserve the group's internal cohesion. IS-KP's growing presence in Afghanistan has further solidified its internal unity across the rank and file. IS-KP emerged during the Taliban's vulnerable moments, shortly after it lost its undisputed and unifying founding leader, Mullah Omar.[92] His demise led to intra-group tensions due to the vacuum in the leadership council that escalated with the untimely killing of his successor, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur. The group struggled with vision, strategy, and repeated disagreements erupted among top members of the movement, especially over the position of the supreme leadership. It was at this time that the IS-KP sought to exploit the Taliban's internal fractures and uncertainties surrounding rightful leadership after the demise of Mullah Omar, by using it as a propaganda tool to attract disillusioned Taliban fighters.[93] The Islamic State began arguing that, with no powerful leader (similar to the stature of Mullah Omar), the disaffected members should transfer their allegiance to *al-Baghdadi*, whom they portrayed as the rightful Islamic Leader.[94] After a short period of tactical cooperation between the Taliban and the IS-KP in the initial years, the latter, while criticising the Taliban, has called them out as not following and implementing the true tenets of Shari 'ah law in Afghanistan.[95] Apart from ideology, the IS-KP are also against the Taliban because they consider the latter as a secular and nationalist group that serves the interests of the U.S., China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia[96]—thereby referring to them as not true Muslims. The IS-KP has continued with its attempts to project the Taliban as unfit to be declared as the legitimate rulers in Afghanistan and has indulged in recruiting leaders into its group based on some of the above discourses.[97]

Significantly, it can be seen from the above that these strategic considerations appear to guide the Taliban today in reinforcing internal cohesion despite differences/rifts within the leadership. Therefore, Amir ul-Ma'minin's past and current policy directives—related to religious norms, governance, or

foreign affairs—offer an insight not only into the Taliban's ideological foundations but also reflect their urgency to challenge IS-KP's propaganda against them**.**

Kabul-Kandahar Divide: A Myth or Reality

The perceived Kabul–Kandahar divide within the Taliban reflects a tension between myth and reality. Many external assessments emphasize a split between the Kandahar and Kabul leadership, portraying the movement as internally fractured. In reality, though genuine differences exist, rooted in governance approach, interpretations of Sharia, and individual ambitions, these have not produced formalized factions. The Emir's consolidation of authority in Kandahar, combined with the Taliban's shared ideology, historical cohesion, and tribal-religious bonds, continues to unify the movement. Instances of disagreement illustrate rhetorical or policy divergences rather than structural fragmentation. Moreover, the persistent threat posed by IS-KP incentivizes internal cohesion, as factional disputes could weaken both security and legitimacy. In this sense, the Kabul–Kandahar divide exists, with differences present but constrained by central authority and strategic necessity.

Finally, even though there are tensions and small disagreements within the Taliban, these do not break the group apart. The Taliban is capable of managing internal disputes without fragmenting, challenging the widespread assumption that the movement is deeply divided. Understanding this resilience helps explain how the group maintains organizational coherence and leadership strength.

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