

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Taliban in 2024

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Reacting to corruption and oppression in the Kandahar of 1994, the Taliban is seen as working with Sunni clerics to foster a *shariat* movement for advancing economic justice and (corporal) punishment. Before long, the organization began substantially rewarding joiners, arming for jihad, and resisting international forces in Afghanistan. Now, with less foreign resources to fight the Taliban, the Kabul central government has unfinished business with its still-robust challengers. In the face of recent modernization in sectors such as education and media, the author details three plausible scenarios for the Taliban to maintain its core shariat mission. One scenario is for the Taliban to re-secure (through continued force) its initial goal, *viz.*, overall state power to promote and enforce shariat across urban as well as rural areas. Another possibility projects Afghanistan as operating a dualist system of separate zones, one for the Taliban's 'liberated territory,' the other for the rest of Afghanistan as governed by Kabul. Achieving scenario three would be formidable: it posits that Taliban leaders may be persuaded that their armed jihad has run its course and can profitably be disconnected from the Middle East's broader Islamic conflict. Conceivably, then, through accommodations with a shariat-accepting Kabul government, Taliban might be able to win buy-in for peace from its own military and its own fighting priests with their strong ties to Afghan communities in Pakistan.

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
- 'Burnt Norton' by T.S. Eliot

Introduction: The Taliban's first two decades

The Taliban Movement's origin myth describes how Mullah Mohammad Omar, enraged by the oppressive behaviour of former mujahideen commanders around the southern Afghan city of Kandahar gathered around him

a group of clerics and madrassah students committed to purging the area of these brigands.¹ Mullah Omar and his friends were able to persuade sympathetic mujahideen, such as Haji Bashar Nurzai,² to provide them with sufficient weapons and resources to equip a small vigilante force. The band of men who answered Mullah Omar's call became the Taliban Movement. They dedicated themselves to eradicating the moral corruption and insecurity which were the hallmarks of life in Kandahar under the wayward mujahideen. Mullah Omar's rebellion took place in 1994, which means that 2024 will mark its thirtieth anniversary. By that time the Taliban Movement will have seen three major phases – the period of its rise to power and imposition

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of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) (1994–2001), the period of the international intervention in Afghanistan (2001–2014) and the decade after the international intervention (2015–2024).

The architects of the Bonn Conference in December 2001, charged with establishing a system of government to replace the Islamic Emirate, wrongly assumed that the Taliban Movement would have no further role in Afghan politics. By the end of the international intervention, through force of arms and effective organisation,³ the Taliban Movement had both survived and demonstrated itself a force to be reckoned with, able to influence the outcome of attempts to stabilise the country. The survival of the Taliban as a major military-political actor, during the difficult period of international intervention and active suppression of the Movement, suggests that it should be robust enough to survive the rather more conducive environment of post-NATO Afghanistan. Post-NATO Afghanistan is likely to be more conducive for the Taliban because Afghan security forces will have access to fewer military resources to devote to the suppression of the Taliban, which will make accommodation appear a more realistic strategy for the Afghan government than eradication. Thus, on current performance there is every probability that the Taliban Movement will remain a force in Afghan politics in 2024.

This essay draws upon the experience of the Taliban's first two decades to suggest what the Taliban's role is likely to be in 2024. The first point of reference for this is Taliban doctrine which has governed the movement since soon after its foundation. This gives the first indication of the kind of role the Taliban Movement is likely to have by the end of its third decade. But, in its first two decades, alongside doctrine, the development has been shaped by the movement's political economy and the political-military context in the region. A similar combination of principle, interest and opportunity is likely to guide the Taliban in their third decade.⁴

The Taliban's core mission: *shariat* enforcement

The Taliban in 2024 will be dedicated to reforming Afghan society in accordance with their understanding of the principles of justice. The cross-cutting theme in this mission will be that of promoting meritorious behaviour and forbidding evil (الإلا مر بالمعروف والنهي عن المنكر). The Taliban's main tool for grappling with good and evil will be the *shariat* code, through which they will try to regulate Afghans' lives. The headings around which Taliban *shariat* enforcers will organise their efforts are already well known because they took the trouble to codify them during the period when the Taliban were in control of the state.⁵

The first pillar of the Taliban's *shariat* enforcement will consist of promoting obedience to their Emir or supreme leader. They refer to this as the doctrine of *d-ameer d-etaat* (د امير د اطاعت). They will maintain a distinction between the absolute obedience owed by officials of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate, who have sworn an oath of loyalty to the *emir* and the respect demanded of other Afghan Muslims who are not formally part of the Taliban. From the Taliban perspective, obedience to the *emir* ensures the moral rectitude of actions carried out at all levels of the movement because the *emir* follows a divinely guided path and thus assumes moral responsibility for the actions of subordinates. In more secular terms, this doctrine of obedience to the *emir* allowed the Taliban movement to maintain its cohesiveness and effectiveness as an organisation during its first twenty years, contrary to the fissiparous tendencies of Afghan politics.

The Taliban will challenge what they identify as key elements of economic corruption. They will seek to expose and punish bribery (رشوت), with a main focus on public officials who abuse their office, but also including citizens who seek illegal favours and thus corrupt officials. They will punish those who illegally access public resources (بييت المال). They will also seek to protect

property from illegal expropriation (الغسب), focusing in particular on abuse of the courts by people pursuing false claims to land and buildings. Because of the central role of the judiciary in the Taliban's reform mission, they will also focus on ensuring the uprightness of judges (العمل في القضاء) and punishing them for any involvement in corruption. Because Taliban judges rely heavily on the evidence of witnesses, they will also try to promote good practice in evidence taking (الاقضية و السهادات).

Unsurprisingly, alongside their efforts to assure economic justice, the Taliban will also promote the idea of *hadood* (حدود) – enforcing set forms of corporal punishments for criminal offences ranging from theft to adultery. Similarly they will promote the practice of *qisas* (القصاص) as punishment for murder, through which the heirs of the deceased can demand the execution of the murderer, or grant clemency and accept compensation.

Beyond the main themes of assuring economic justice and punishing crimes against the person, the Taliban will pursue other opportunities to combat cruelty and oppression (الظلم) through Islamic jurisprudence. Turabi and his advisers at the Ministry of Justice assembled 240 pages worth of examples and precedents to illustrate the importance of these themes and to guide fellow Taliban in applying them to deliver Islamic Justice. Furthermore, Turabi's guidelines merely provide an important example of a much larger Taliban corpus on how they aspire to shape Afghan society. Even more detail is available in the Afghan official gazettes from the IEA years, which record the Taliban's legislative programme – multiple sets of elaborate regulations aiming to align personal behaviour and economic life with Islamic principles.

The reason that we can reliably predict the issues which the Taliban will be focused on ten years after the end of the NATO mission in Afghanistan is because engagement on these issues is essential for the Taliban. The essence of the Taliban, to which there

is a commitment across the movement, is *shariat* promotion. The significance of the Taliban as a *shariat*-based movement is that Taliban have a vision for transformation of Afghan society and, as a movement of clerics, educated in Sunni-Hanafi jurisprudence, claim for themselves a leading role in effecting that transformation. Other roles which the Taliban accrued in their first two decades, most notably waging armed jihad and countering the international presence in Afghanistan, were contingent on the political-military circumstances. Taliban were still Taliban even before they fought against the United States. But Taliban are only Taliban if they promote *shariat*.

By dedicating themselves to reorganising Afghan society according to the principles of *shariat* the Taliban project themselves as a movement above tribe and ethnicity, which poses no threat to anyone beyond Afghanistan's borders. The Taliban's prescription for justice-led social reform is also much more elaborate than might be suggested by the polemics of both detractors and supporters of applying *shariat* law. The issues highlighted in hostile populist discourse, restrictions on women and corporal punishments, are not even particularly prominent in Turabi's treatment. Whereas early supporters of the Taliban warned them to be alert to sabotage by the western powers who could not tolerate the application of Islamic law anywhere, most of the Taliban prescriptions for Islamic justice would simply be of no interest to external powers.

Quite distinct from the western populist alarms about *shariat*, the Taliban's unflinching devotion to promoting it raises the question of whether a movement can stay relevant while clinging to a constant core agenda over the decades. Social and cultural changes which Afghanistan will have experienced between 1994 and 2024 include rapid population growth, youth bulge, rural-urban migration, spread of modern education, massively expanded access to modern media, increased mobility within the country and

global inter-connectedness. Much of the thrust of cultural change, such as the emergence of a generation of urban-dwelling, educated, globalised youth working in the formal sectors, is likely to increase suspicion of the Taliban and their programme. However, several of the items on the Taliban *shariat* enforcement agenda are relevant to contemporary social problems which the 2001–2014 Kabul administrations grappled with unsuccessfully. Successive revolutions, mass migrations and corruption of administration and judiciary left the legacy of a crisis in both rural and urban property rights. Grievances around corruption are widely publicised and there is little confidence in the judiciary. The conditions of acute insecurity which inspired the original Taliban revolt in Kandahar were largely absent by the end of the NATO mission. But the Kabul government's employment of a system of patronage offered key backers of the government a degree of impunity and undermined the rule of law. It is precisely in such conditions that a Taliban promise to use *shariat* to clamp down on crime has resonance. Come what may, the Taliban in 2024 will proclaim themselves as dedicated to applying the *shariat* code in Afghanistan.

The Afghanistan in which the Taliban will promote *shariat*

For as long as they survive as a cohesive movement, the Taliban will dedicate themselves to *shariat* promotion. However there are radically difference vantage points from which the Taliban might be pursuing their *shariat*-based mission. The underlying issue is what will have happened to Afghanistan's contest for state power. From the Taliban's perspective there are three plausible scenarios for Afghanistan in 2024. In the optimal case they will have re-captured Kabul, seized state power again and restored their Islamic Emirate. Alternatively, if the war has proved inconclusive, the Taliban will be in control of a large swathe of territory, but Afghanistan will have a dualist system, divided between areas

of government control and the Taliban zone. Finally, if the Taliban were to reach political agreement with the Kabul Government, they could find themselves peacefully promoting *shariat* while participating in some form of broad-based government.

In the case of restoration of the Islamic Emirate, the Taliban could enlist all instruments of government for the process of *shariat* enforcement. They would fully control the judiciary, could establish a religious police, would reform state institutions for *shariat* compliance and could resume their programme of legislation to regulate personal behaviour. Taliban official pronouncements in the years running up to 2014 provided few clues about the political system they would prefer in the case of restoration.⁶ Their practice during 1996–2001 therefore provides the only point of reference. In this period the Taliban governed without a constitution. Their *emir* Mullah Omar exercised powers roughly equivalent to an executive President. He ruled without legislature or elections and periodically summoned gatherings of *ulema*⁷ if he wanted to legitimise a controversial stance. Public communiqués attributed to the Taliban leader in the run up to 2014 claimed that the movement did not seek a monopoly of power. However, Taliban practice towards pluralism while in power last time was minimalist and fell short of real power-sharing. Instead, they sought to co-opt non-Pashtun political groups into their system, on the condition that all recognise the authority of *Emir ul Momineen*,⁸ Mullah Omar.

There is scope for significant modifications in the Taliban's second round of state-led *shariat* enforcement. Some in the movement concluded from their first experience that they unnecessarily alienated the civilian population through excess enthusiasm in enforcement of petty restrictions, such as beard styles or the television ban. To address this, rather than altering the broad contours of the *shariat* enforcement project, the Taliban could curtail the arbitrary powers of religious police to dictate personal behaviour

under the guise of promoting good and forbidding evil. It is far less likely that the Taliban, after a military victory, would concede either substantive power-sharing or meaningful elections. Either of these would run counter to the fundamental principle of obedience to the *emir* and in any case the population could not be trusted to elect the Taliban's favoured candidates.

In the case of a protracted conflict in which the government held onto Kabul, enforcing *shariat* in a large swathe of liberated territory would be a viable, and in many ways attractive, option for the Taliban. In this scenario also, the vehicle for enforcing *shariat* would be the Taliban's Islamic Emirate. But, there would be a dualist system under which the Islamic Emirate institutions operated in Taliban areas, parallel to the state structures of the cities and anti-Taliban countryside. This would build directly on the situation which developed during the 2001–2014 anti-NATO insurgency. Despite lacking secure control of large areas, the Taliban developed an area administration a judiciary and a dozen national commissions.

In this dualist system the Kabul government would have access to a full set of modern institutions and would be locked in a war of attrition with the Taliban. That struggle should not be misconstrued as one for and against the idea of enforcing *shariat*, despite attempts by Taliban or their foreign detractors to depict it as such. There is every likelihood that the Kabul government would declare itself as anti-Taliban, but *pro-shariat*, as a way of asserting Islamic credentials to legitimise itself. Although well short of Taliban goals, the protracted war and dualist system would spare the movement the need to engage in political compromise with hostile parts of the population over the modus operandi of their *shariat* enforcement.

In many ways, *shariat* promotion in the context of a peace settlement and broad-based government would constitute the greatest challenge for the Taliban. To reach this point the Taliban would have had to

declare an end to their jihad and become a constitutional organisation. The Taliban leadership would still proclaim that their mission was promotion of *shariat* and they would assert loyalty to the objectives Taliban have pursued since 1994. But they would be obliged to seek consent for a programme which hitherto they had been able to pursue through fiat or force. A broad-based government could probably stomach inducting significant numbers of Taliban into the lower judiciary and would find it relatively easy to support Taliban opening madrassahs, so they could teach and preach the *shariat* rather than enforce it. Afghan factions which opposed the Taliban up to 2014 did so not just because of the *shariat* agenda but because they considered the Taliban a vehicle of Pashtun domination. These groups would be loath to concede the Taliban control over the judiciary or other key national institutions. Therefore the Taliban could expect their scope for use of state institutions to promote *shariat* in a post-settlement Afghanistan to be seriously circumscribed.

Essence and existence: the Taliban agenda beyond *shariat*

The Taliban Movement openly proclaims its *shariat* enforcement agenda because this is the cornerstone of the Taliban's claim to Islamic legitimacy. However, in its first two decades the Taliban Movement accrued a set of political and economic activities which went well beyond *shariat* enforcement. Furthermore, those directly in charge of *shariat* enforcement, the Taliban's judges and *ulema*, never controlled the organisation. Instead, the Taliban's inner circle leaders made a show of respect for the senior clerics, but excluded them from serious decision-making. The Taliban in 2024 will be subject to a similar imperative. Alongside its proclaimed role in *shariat* enforcement, the movement will seek to protect the interests of the cohorts who joined it over the three decades.

Alongside *shariat* enforcement, the Taliban's other preoccupation since 1994

has been armed jihad. The conflict went through several metamorphoses as the Taliban faced a succession of enemies – first the Kandahar commanders, then the factions in Kabul, then the ‘Northern Alliance,’ then the Americans and NATO, and then the Kabul government. The constant over twenty years was that the Taliban were involved in fighting for control of Afghanistan. The state of being engaged in jihad also became important for the Taliban’s legitimisation strategy at both an organisational level and an individual level. On one level Taliban fund-raisers could approach rich Arabs who were intent on supporting the global jihad. At a more grass-roots level a young Taliban fighter in a Pashtun village could demand to be fed and accommodated in the best guest room. Furthermore, the state of jihad reinforced the authority of Taliban *emirs*, allowing them to assert power of life and death over members of the movement.

The single most important ideological-political question regarding the movement’s role in 2024 is whether it will still be actively involved in fighting jihad. It is possible to envisage viable strategies for the Taliban to have moved beyond jihad and retain their essence as an Islamist movement. The key ‘technical’ step would be a declaration by the movement’s *ulema* that conditions prevailing in Afghanistan, (a triumph of Islam) no longer rendered participation in the jihad an individual obligation incumbent on Afghan Muslims. Beyond this, Taliban propagandists could continue to extol the merits of jihad in general terms. Pakistan provides plenty examples of Islamist movements which have successfully balanced a rhetorical and ideological position in favour of the jihad with a reality of co-existing peacefully with the Pakistani state. The political context will determine whether the Taliban are in the equivalent position in Afghanistan by 2024. If they are co-opted into the Afghan state, they will have to assert their Islamic legitimacy primarily by promoting the *shariat*. If they grab Kabul and restore their Islamic Emirate they will have the option

of declaring an unending jihad against the residual armed opposition.

The consequences of two decades of jihad for the Taliban Movement were as much sociological as theological. Involvement in the armed struggle shaped the Taliban as a vast network of semi-clandestine networks, all linked to the Taliban leadership. Members of the networks swore allegiance to the Taliban’s *emir* but also acquired entitlements – the ability to claim resources from the movement or from other Afghans in the name of the movement. The Taliban Movement became a massive redistributive enterprise, forcefully accumulating resources and channelling them to that part of the Afghan clergy which had proclaimed loyalty to Mullah Omar.

Its administration of resources has been one of the key elements in the Taliban Movement’s effectiveness as an organisation. The Taliban developed multiple sources of revenue, including taxes on economic activity in the areas where the movement has influence, international fund-raising and criminal extortion.⁹ The movement retained a Spartan ethos. The appetite of the senior leaders for the trappings of power, such as fancy vehicles, luxury residences and property portfolios was much more moderate than that of the elite which installed itself in Kabul after 2001. Taliban commanders in the field continued to receive resources for their armed campaign through the central command chain and the Taliban’s civilian administration and support structures also continued to receive stipends and budgets through the movement’s financial system. As a result, since 1994, for young men passing through the pro-Taliban *madrassahs*, commitment to jihad was not just a philosophical choice, it offered a livelihood. Waging jihad and capturing the state gave the Taliban leadership the means to appropriate resources. But on the liability side, the thousands of Afghans who joined Taliban networks, as fighters or as civilian officials, expect the movement to support them. Although the Taliban’s political economy of conflict is different from that of the Kabul-based elites, it subjects

the movement to imperatives nonetheless. The Taliban Movement in 2024 will have inherited not just an ideology requiring it to be seen to promote the *shariat*, it will have inherited an extensive network of clerics, many of them with combat experience, all of whom look to the leadership to furnish them a livelihood. Whether the conflict is ongoing or suspended, the main preoccupation of the Taliban leadership, is most likely to involve servicing their networks – marshalling the resources required to answer their supporters' demands for stipends, wedding expenses, motorbikes, Hajj trips and everything encompassed by the Taliban entitlements.

The fund-raising strategies available to the leadership will be circumscribed by the political-military context. In the absence of a clear outcome to the conflict, the Taliban will continue to fund-raise in the name of the jihad and to use their military power to extort resources. In the case of a political settlement the most likely strategy of the leadership would be to pursue state patronage. For example, they would use state endowment of madrassahs and the mass migration of Taliban supporters into the judiciary or relevant parts of the state bureaucracy to transform the movement's liabilities into state liabilities. However, a Taliban leadership with decades of experience of imposing informal taxation or extortion in the name of jihad would be eminently capable of launching illegal fund-raising even after a political settlement. While the Islamic jurists dispute *hudood* punishments or segregation of women, more powerful Taliban will manoeuvre to determine the control of marble mines in Herat, opium in Helmand, construction contracts in Kabul and chromite in Paktia.

Challenges in the face of a peaceful transformation

Proxy war

The most obvious way in which an extant Taliban Movement in 2024 could contribute to stabilisation would be if the movement had transformed its role from pursuing a violent jihad against the state to peacefully

promoting *shariat* within the state. However, any Taliban leadership seeking to effect such a transformation will confront a series of political challenges. Moreover, the challenge applies equally to the rest of Afghan society and international allies of Afghanistan: how would they be capable of absorbing a movement which renounced violence, but declared itself still intent on reordering Afghanistan in the light of the *shariat*?

In the first place the leadership will have to extricate itself from the proxy warfare relationships which were a fundamental part of Taliban politics during the anti-NATO insurgency. Taliban survival post-2001 was dependent on maintaining the blessing of the Pakistan security establishment. This meant that Taliban leaders had to be sensitive to that establishment's red lines and to rule out any course of action (primarily dealing with armed groups or countries deemed hostile to Pakistan), which involved crossing them. If the leadership were to exit the conflict in favour of a peaceful role in Kabul it would either have to convince its erstwhile patrons that their interests too would be served by the shift. Or it would have to make alternative arrangements for the protection and support hitherto delivered by the proxy relationship. This is an example of the way in which conflict transformation may require visionary leadership from the fighters, to break out of the cycle whereby you sustain the conflict to maintain the means you require to fight the war.

Parallel to their state-level relationships, the Taliban's non-Afghan jihadi allies constitute another interest group and set of relationships which would impinge upon leadership efforts at peaceful transition. Al Qaeda and regional jihadi groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan provided military trainers and fighters to the Taliban during the anti-NATO insurgency and thus sustained their organisations on the back of the Afghan war. Their interests could only be served either by an open-ended conflict, or a restoration of the Islamic Emirate, as in either case they could expect to continue to access

Afghan territory. The jihadi allies would suspect treachery in any outcome where the Taliban settled for less than full control of the state because any settlement would be bound to demand their exclusion from Afghanistan. They would be implacable and violent opponents of any Taliban move to a settlement.

Political economy of militancy

The shift to a peaceful role for the Taliban would require a political strategy which assured buy-in from those who were empowered by the years of armed struggle. If the Taliban Movement is primarily focused on peaceful promotion of *shariat*, the most prominent positions should be occupied by Islamic judges and scholars – the Taliban's civilians. But during the period of anti-NATO insurgency, power and prestige in the movement accrued to the military. Despite the leadership's long record of maintaining internal discipline, it would struggle to convince the military that the shift to a peaceful role warranted relinquishing the prestige associated with running a violent jihad. At the very least the Taliban military would seek to patronise the men linked to them through their comradeship networks.

Pluralism and militants as minority stakeholders

One of the profound challenges for the Taliban in adopting a peaceful role in *shariat* promotion would involve the embracing of pluralism. The Taliban's political philosophy claims that the movement's *emir* is divinely guided and that therefore supporters, in submitting to the *emir* are obeying God's commands. Until 2001 the Taliban sought to impose the authority of their *emir* on the state, thus making Mullah Omar into both a spiritual and a temporal leader. No other political group in Afghanistan is likely to accept the Taliban *emir's* political or spiritual authority. To adopt a peaceful role the Taliban would have to embrace political compromise, by showing loyalty to a state which they did not dominate, with a president other than their *emir*. The Taliban could continue to

treat their *emir* as a spiritual leader, following his guidance in peacefully promoting *shariat*. But they would be unlikely to obtain acknowledgement of this spiritual authority from other Afghan groups. There are precedents for Islamic movements, headed by charismatic spiritual figures with large followings, which co-exist with the state. These leaders are revered by their followers but merely tolerated by society at large. However, for the Taliban to forego any claims to state power would be a major reduction in ambition. The other way of approaching the problem of pluralism is to see it as a challenge for Afghan society to find ways of accommodating the Taliban's commitment to advancing Hanifi jurisprudence, while protecting the interests of Afghan groups who dispute the Taliban's conception of the *shariat*. This would become as much a challenge for the architects of any settlement as for the Taliban leaders.

Radical alternatives to Taliban shariat promoters

The Taliban leadership would be seriously challenged in maintaining the movement's cohesiveness in the face of Islamist alternatives, who would try to recruit Taliban supporters in the event of a move towards peace. For its first two decades of operation the Taliban Movement was able to project itself as the Afghan Islamist group at the forefront of both jihad and social transformation. In the event of the Taliban moving towards some sort of accommodation with the state in Kabul the leadership would be accused of sell-out and there would be a risk of more radical groups challenging the Taliban by promising to continue fighting, thus dragging them into a turf war. The Taliban leadership would be obliged to 're-tool,' developing a rhetoric which refuted the claims of the extremists, and defended peace in the way they had for years defended war.

Emir and Emirate

Underpinning all other challenges around transformation of the Taliban's role is the question of how the movement will be led.

What will be the profile of the *emir* of the Islamic Emirate? The authority of the *emir* was fundamental to the success of the movement in its first two decades, as exemplified by the fact that the movement's charter for Islamic justice commented on above started with the invocation of obedience to the *emir*. However, the Taliban supreme leader played a symbolic role only in the insurgency against NATO and Kabul, in that orders and proclamations were issued in his name. He made no public appearances and, during the second half of the insurgency, did not even have communication with his senior-most aides.¹⁰ The inaccessible leader was a device which seemed to work during the phase of clandestine struggle. But, if the Taliban were to exit the conflict and embark upon peaceful *shariat* promotion, they would require an accessible leader. This would require either releasing Mullah Omar from the restrictions which inhibited him from participating in the insurgency, or adopting a new *emir*. Many in the movement doubt that the former course of action is possible and believe that Mullah Omar is physically incapable of returning to the helm. But, the Taliban do not have available to them any alternative to Mullah Omar who inspires comparable loyalty across the movement. Any attempt to transition to a new leader would carry attendant risks of splits and diminution of the authority of the *emir* and the whole command chain.

Conclusions

The Taliban in 2024 will be a movement which struggles to promote the *shariat* as an organising principle for life across Afghanistan. While doing so, it will continue to champion the interests and secure the livelihoods of its core constituency – that part of the Sunni clergy which after 1994 chose to recognise Mullah Omar as their *emir*.

The Taliban's commitment to their *shariat*-based mission is potentially compatible with a peaceful and pluralistic Afghanistan, if the Taliban leadership declares that its jihad has run its course and the movement embraces political accommodation. The presence of

the Taliban, engaged in peaceful activities, within the political order, could be a significant stabilising force in Afghanistan by 2024 as the movement would deliver the loyalty of those cohorts of Afghans who had previously struggled against the Kabul government. Taliban affirmation of the Islamic credentials of the Kabul-based political system would render it more difficult for new generations of anti-state movements, or indeed regional proxies, to obtain jihadi legitimacy.

The challenges of transitioning the Taliban to a peaceful role are formidable and would require a combination of leadership vision within the movement and recognition of mutual interest from their erstwhile foes among the elites who built the 2001–2014 political order in Kabul. A significant degree of cooperation across the political divide would be required to orchestrate the Taliban's transition. The challenge would amount to refashioning the livelihood systems and culture of a class of fighting priests, with strong connections to Afghan communities in Pakistan. Success would depend upon winning buy-in from the Taliban's military, imagining a new role for the movement's leader and extricating the Taliban from their alliances with militant groups committed to a more globalised vision of the jihad.

If the Taliban and their opposite numbers in Kabul prove incapable of the orchestration required to transform the movement to a peaceful role, the Taliban will pursue a more warlike path to asserting themselves as defenders of *shariat*. The default option for the Taliban in the years after 2014 is to sustain the armed struggle against the government in Kabul. This would allow it either to enforce *shariat* in pockets of 'liberated territory' or, in the event of government collapse, to restore its Islamic Emirate and the status quo ante of a combination of national level *shariat* enforcement and jihad against the residual armed opposition. Permanent jihad and peaceful *shariat* enforcement are two viable alternative versions of the Taliban future.

Which of the versions of the Taliban's future materialises depends on many actor

decisions in addition to the Taliban themselves as well as the broader context of conflict in the Muslim world. Previous transformations in Afghanistan were linked to broader conflicts. The 1989 Soviet withdrawal coincided with the uprising in Kashmir, which drew some of the jihadi fighters away to this new front. The collapse of the Kabul government in 1992 coincided with the turbulence of post-Soviet Central Asia and the departure of a contingent of Afghan mujahideen to fight in Azerbaijan. The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria forms the backdrop to the 2014 NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan and the dilemma for the Taliban's post-NATO role. Whether the Taliban end up peacefully promoting *shariat* or permanently fighting for it is also a question of whether Afghanistan will be isolated from the Islamic State conflict or integrated into it.

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Notes

- ¹ The story has been reproduced multiple times. I refer to Mullah Omar's own telling of the story in an interview with a Taliban publication *The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan* (I.E.A. 2000).
- ² In 2005 Haji Bashar was lured to the US and arrested on charges of being a major drug trafficker.
- ³ For an introduction to the Taliban as an effective organisation, see Sinno 2008.
- ⁴ In addition to published sources, the interpretations of the Taliban presented in this paper draw on the author's two decades of inter-action with the Taliban Movement.
- ⁵ This description of the Taliban's *shariat* programme is drawn from a 240 page

volume compiled by the then Islamic Emirate Minister for Justice, which was used as guidance for Taliban judges (Turabi 2000).

- ⁶ For example the July 2014 Eid greeting attributed to Mullah Omar simply promised 'a regime in which all ethnicities, tribes and groups of the Afghan society will see themselves,' with no elucidation of the basis of participation or any promise of power-sharing (Shahamat).
- ⁷ Islamic scholars.
- ⁸ Formal title adopted by the Taliban leader. It literally means 'leader of the faithful.' This was one of the titles used by the early *caliphs* and thus its use implies a claim to caliph-like status for Mullah Omar.
- ⁹ See Peters 2009 for an example of investigation into Taliban funding.
- ¹⁰ In the period 2001–2008 Mullah Omar communicated by audio message. The last publicly available recording dates to early 2008. Taliban have continued to publish statements in Mullah Omar's name but have never produced evidence of his authorship. At a minimum he is incommunicado. Many Taliban concluded he is dead, detained or incapacitated.

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