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Taliban Perspectives on Factional Tensions & Girls' Education

Qualitative Interviews with the Taliban, July & August 2022



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This is an ESDO Summary Research Report. It is designed to provide a summary of primary source research into a particular issue of relevance to ESDO's missions.

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Findings



Tensions between the Kandahari Taliban and the Haqqani Network (HN) persist. The tensions continue to fester around appointments to positions of influence and access to resources for the separate factions.



There is widespread desire and support for girls' education at every level of the Taliban. The major exception is at the most senior level of the Kandahari Taliban.



Senior Taliban are still claiming that a solution to allow girls education above year six, will emerge soon.



All the senior Taliban interviewed were clear that Taliban unity was more important than there being disunity on the issue of girls' education.



The HN is trying to appear moderate to court international support for the new government in Afghanistan.



All the senior Taliban and all the religious scholars interviewed were clear that the Quran does not prohibit girls' education. Religious justifications aside, the idea of girls' education does foster discomfort for older Taliban.



There was a strong consensus from the Taliban that boys and girls should be segregated at school and not co-educated.



A range of Afghan Taliban and tribal elders continue to express long-held suspicions of Pakistani motivations and intentions towards Afghanistan. Their belief is that Pakistan wants Afghanistan to remain underdeveloped to be controllable. This belief has a curious impact on the views of some Taliban on the issue of girls' education if they believe Pakistan encourages the education ban to keep Afghanistan underdeveloped.



There is widespread recognition at all levels and provinces that not allowing girls' education will mean the international community not engaging with Afghanistan. There seems to be much anxiety attached to this, with the anxiety inverse proportionally to seniority.





Methodology

ESDO conducted primary source qualitative unstructured interviews with 16 Taliban over the course of several weeks in July and August 2022.

Eight of these Taliban were 'senior' and were either Deputy Leader of the Taliban (n=1), Ministers (n=1), Deputy Ministers (n=2), Provincial Governors (n=2) or the heads of provincial police force (n=2) in the current Taliban government.



Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in 2020. Credit: Wikipedia

This included interviews with Abdul Ghani Baradar known to be a co-founder of the Taliban with

Mullah Omar and currently one of the acting First Deputy Prime Ministers.

A further eight interviews were conducted with more 'junior' members of the Taliban, including working in provincial government administrations, for example a head of a provincial education department, a head of provincial finance department and a head of a provincial rural development department.

A further n=4 very well-known religious scholars based in Afghanistan supported by the Taliban and known to be close to the Taliban leadership were also interviewed, along with n=3 tribal elders from three different eastern provinces.

The interviews were conducted by an Afghan with 15 years' experience in qualitative primary source research.

The interview format was designed to feel informal in order to gain unguarded responses and stimulate long and wide-ranging discussions on key issues. Given the deliberate informal format, notes were taken during the interviews and then elaborated and updated after the interviews were concluded.





Insights

Taliban Factional Tensions

There is widespread recognition of the tensions at senior levels between the two major Taliban factions. All interview participants referred to tension and competition between the Kandahari Taliban and the Haqqani Network (HN).

The foundation of this tension is continued competition and jostling for position and resources in the new government and regional leadership structures.

Interviewees believe the justifications for each faction's position have settled into a pattern. The Kandahari Taliban claim they should have more power because they have more religious knowledge and were the founders of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

While the HN believe they have sacrificed more by committing more suicide attacks during the war with NATO and the previous Afghan Government, and that this qualifies for increased resources and

position.

Almost of all the interviewees including both senior and junior Taliban, the religious scholars and tribal elders said that the HN have more government positions controlling revenue than the Kandahari Taliban. They believe this includes passport issuance, Customs and the finance ministry.

Several tribal elders, all of the junior members of the Taliban and one senior member of the Taliban believe that the HN is trying to moderate their behaviour in order to appear more flexible to the international community. This may have implications for future power struggles.





Girls Education

All of the interviewees, including Abdul Ghani Baradar and a deputy minister, said their preference was for girls to be educated. However, mistrust persists.

Solving the 'Problem'

All the senior Taliban interviewed, and the religious scholars were clear that education is one of the key elements of Islam.¹ There was consensus amongst the Taliban interviewed that there is no issue with the education of girls from a religious perspective.

Abdul Ghani Baradar said clearly that girls have the right to be educated. He said the Taliban were working to solve this issue soon.

The deputy minister said that the Taliban government wants to 'solve this problem', a reference to allowing girls to go back to school. He said however, that this may take time as there are 'different views among the Taliban' leadership about the reopening of girls' schools. Speaking informally, he said the priority for the Taliban is to keep their unity and avoid any particular issue exacerbating tension or creating disunity between the Taliban factions.

There was widespread belief that it was the Taliban government's responsibility to organise the education system (curriculum, textbooks, buildings) in such a way that girls can attend.

Haibatullah's Personal View

While Baradar and the deputy minister did not elaborate on the non-religious issues causing the girls education issue, several interviewees close to

the senior leadership shared their insights. Six senior, two junior and two religious scholars were clear that Haibatullah Akhunzada² harbours a personal view that he does not support girls' education. Several interviewees said he has held this view since he was young during the Jihad against Russia.

Several interviewees believed that Haibatullah was supported in his view by influential Taliban religious scholars who are not in the government structure, but have a strong influence on, and respect from, the Taliban leadership. The religious scholars they referred to were not identified.

The Development Need

By comparison, several members of the Taliban interviewed expressed a clear view that educating girls is needed if Afghanistan is to develop and prosper. This appeared to be a genuine sentiment.

Perceived Hypocrisy

Several of the junior and senior Taliban interviewed mentioned that Taliban senior leaders were educating their daughters outside of Afghanistan.

No Co-education

If and when girls are allowed to attend school again, there was widespread consensus that boys and girls

¹ The first verse of the holy Quran explains that people should pursue education, without reference to gender.

² The third and current Supreme Leader of the Taliban.





should be segregated during education and not coeducated, particularly after grade three or four of school.

Cultural Drivers

There were some conflicting views about the role of culture influencing the issue of girls' education. Most dismissed this, but some believed cultural habits and beliefs in some areas did play a role in parents preventing girls from going to school above a certain age.

Betrayal of Soldiers

A younger Taliban member who had been a soldier in Kandahar and was now working in the Taliban army administration expressed that he was very sad about girls' schools being closed. He said this was not his expectation and nor was it the expectation of the other Taliban he fought with. He believed passionately that he had fought and sacrificed to establish a government to, "apply Islam and improve justice, education, health and move towards development in Afghanistan."

The same junior Taliban also expressed worry for women's health if girls are not allowed to be educated and argued that the Taliban could provide better services to the community if women and girls were educated.

Mistrust & Women's Rights

Despite the widespread support for girls' education, mistrust persisted. Three senior, two junior, two tribal elders, one religious scholar all expressed sentiments that allowing girls/women to be educated would enable women pursue further women's rights including request representation in

government. Similarly, most Taliban interviewed mentioned that educated girls can be used by the international community as a tool to challenge the Taliban government.

Several Taliban discussed the merits of not all girls needing an education, provided enough girls were educated meet the needs of the community (in healthcare and teaching for example).

Political Implications

A Taliban provincial governor recognised the domestic politics of the issue. He believed that preventing girls' education undermined the Taliban's legitimacy in the Afghan community because 'Allah gives rights to girls to have an education.'

A provincial governor, deputy minister and a tribal elder said that the top leadership of the Taliban "should not play games with the Afghan population" as "everyone knows now that education is the main thing for improving our future."

Loya Jirga

Several of the interviewees had attended the recent Loya Jirga 2022 in Kabul.³ They all relayed that the jirga participants had suggested that girls' schools above year six should be reopened, but that this suggestion was removed by the Taliban.

There was speculation amongst interviewees that the reopening of girls' schools above year six for two days in Paktia province in August was a political act of the HN to show the world that they have changed their behaviour and were supportive of girls' education.

³ The Loya Jirga was attended by more than 3,000 male Islamic scholars, public figures and tribal elders from across all Afghan districts.





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