



Australian Government
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade



DFAT THEMATIC REPORT ON POLITICAL AND SECURITY DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN (AUGUST 2021 TO JANUARY 2022)

14 January 2022

MAP



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ACRONYMS

ANDSF	Afghanistan National Defence and Security Forces
CSO	Civil society organisation
EVAW	Elimination of violence against women
HQN	Haqqani Network
ISKP	Islamic State in Khorasan Province
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and/or Intersex
NDS	National Directorate of Security
NGO	Non-government organisation
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund

GLOSSARY

<i>bacha bazi</i>	'dancing boys' who dance in female attire for adult male audiences and are often sexually abused
honour killings	the murder of an individual, most commonly a girl or a woman, by someone seeking to protect what they see as the dignity and honour of their family.
<i>madrasa</i>	religious school
<i>mujahedeen</i>	members of a number of guerrilla groups that opposed invading Soviet forces and the Soviet-backed Afghan government between 1979 and 1992
<i>Sharia</i>	Islamic law
<i>taskira</i>	a certificate that is the most common form of identification in Afghanistan; 'e- <i>taskira</i> ' denotes an electronic version of the document

Terms used in this report

high risk	DFAT is aware of a strong pattern of incidents
moderate risk	DFAT is aware of sufficient incidents to suggest a pattern of behaviour
low risk	DFAT is aware of incidents but has insufficient evidence to conclude they form a pattern

official discrimination

1. legal or regulatory measures applying to a particular group that impede access to state protection or services that are available to other sections of the population (examples might include but are not limited to difficulties in obtaining personal registrations or identity papers, difficulties in having papers recognised, arbitrary arrest and detention)
2. behaviour by state employees towards a particular group that impedes access to state protection or services otherwise available, including by failure to implement legislative or administrative measures

societal discrimination

1. behaviour by members of society (including family members, employers or service providers) that impedes access by a particular group to goods or services normally available to other sections of society (examples could include but are not limited to refusal to rent property, refusal to sell goods or services, or employment discrimination)
2. ostracism or exclusion by members of society (including family, acquaintances, employers, colleagues or service providers)

1. PURPOSE AND SCOPE

1.1 This Thematic Report has been prepared by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) for protection status determination purposes only. It provides an assessment of political and security conditions in Afghanistan following the Taliban taking power in August 2021. The report provides DFAT's best judgement and assessment at the time of writing and is distinct from Australian Government policy with respect to Afghanistan.

1.2 The report provides a general rather than an exhaustive overview of conditions in Afghanistan. It has been prepared with regard to the current caseload for decision makers in Australia, without reference to individual applications for protection visas. The report does not contain policy guidance for decision makers.

1.3 Ministerial Direction Number 84 of 24 June 2019, issued under s 499 of the Migration Act 1958, states that:

Where the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has prepared [a] country information assessment expressly for protection status determination purposes, and that assessment is available to the decision maker, the decision maker must take into account that assessment, where relevant, in making their decision. The decision maker is not precluded from considering other relevant information about the country.

1.4 This report draws on DFAT's knowledge and discussions with a range of sources in Australia and overseas. It takes into account relevant and credible open source reports, including but not limited to those produced by: relevant UN agencies such as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team; the United States Department of State; international think tanks; non-government organisations; human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Freedom House; and reputable media organisations. Where DFAT does not refer to a specific source of a report or allegation this may be to protect the source.

1.5 This Thematic Report updates and replaces the DFAT Country Information Report on Afghanistan published on 27 June 2019.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

RECENT HISTORY

2.1 Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and remained until 1989. Opponents of the communist Afghan government, collectively known as the mujahedeen, fought a guerrilla campaign with the United States' backing. The end of Soviet support contributed to the collapse of the communist government in 1992. However, infighting between the various mujahedeen factions headed by warlords led to renewed civil war. The Taliban, a hardline politico-religious movement, emerged as the strongest faction. They took control of Kabul in 1996 and declared an 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan'.

2.2 The Taliban allowed safe haven for international terrorist organisations, most notably the Al-Qa'ida movement led by Osama bin Laden, which conducted the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. In response, a US-led international coalition joined with anti-Taliban Afghan elements in 2001 to remove the Taliban from power.

2.3 The United States and allies, including Australia, supported a new national Afghan government, including a new constitution and a democratically-elected President. The Taliban and other anti-government groups continued to contest the Afghan government's control. In 2020, the Doha Agreement between the US Government and the Taliban was concluded. Under that agreement, then-President Donald Trump announced that the United States would withdraw all forces from Afghanistan in 2021. His successor, President Joe Biden, began to implement this policy in 2021, with a final withdrawal date of 30 August 2021. The Doha Agreement notably did not include the Afghan Government as a party and the Taliban did not undertake to refrain from attacks on the government or Afghan civilians.

2.4 As the withdrawal date approached, the Taliban redoubled its efforts to regain power, with the Afghan National Army providing little resistance. On 15 August 2021, Kabul fell to the Taliban. The Taliban occupied government offices, leading to some migration out of the country (though less than originally feared), despite their promise of an 'amnesty' for all Afghans. In early September 2021, the Taliban announced the formation of an 'interim government' and declared once again an 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' (see [Political System](#)).

DEMOGRAPHY

2.5 Afghanistan is an ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse country with a population of approximately 36.6 million, according to the CIA World Factbook. The country has one of the youngest populations in the world: nearly two-thirds of Afghans are under 25 years of age. Accurate data on ethnic groups is not available, but the 2004 constitution recognises 14 ethnic groups: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Baloch, Turkmen, Nuristani, Pamiri, Arab, Gujar, Brahui, Qizilbash, Aimaq, and Pashai.

2.6 Dari, a form of Persian, is used as a lingua franca spoken by about 78 per cent of the population. About half the population speaks Pashto. Both are official languages. Many other languages are spoken in various ethnic communities but reliable statistics are not available. Almost all Afghans identify as Muslim. An estimated 10 to 15 per cent are Shi'a and the rest are Sunni. (A tiny proportion of Afghans – less than 1 per cent – are members of religions other than Islam.)

2.7 Only about a quarter of Afghans live in cities but that number has been increasing year-on-year for decades. Since 1950 the rural population has fallen from 91.5 per cent in 1960 to 73.9 per cent in 2020.

ECONOMIC OVERVIEW

2.8 The Afghan economy is in crisis and close to collapse. Prior to the Taliban takeover, 75 per cent of Afghanistan's economy was dependent on aid. The country had experienced negative economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, conflict, and high food prices following successive years of drought in many provinces and floods in others. Development cooperation aid and trust funds, including those held by the World Bank and other development institutions, were frozen or diverted to humanitarian support following the Taliban takeover in August 2021. The US Federal Reserve and commercial financial institutions have also frozen Afghan government assets, which, with the application of UN sanctions, has contributed to a liquidity crisis. The Taliban is inexperienced in running an effective government and bureaucracy to address the severe issues facing the country.

2.9 Forty-four per cent of the population works in agriculture and 60 per cent of Afghans derive some income from agriculture. However, a drought in 2021 (the second in three years) is harming agricultural output and food security. According to the United Nations Development Programme, 97 per cent of Afghanistan's population may be in poverty by mid-2022. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) states that between November 2021 and March 2022, food security will deteriorate further to the point that nearly 23 million people (out of 38 million) will likely experience acute food insecurity, the highest level ever recorded in Afghanistan.

2.10 Non-agricultural work is limited. Cash shortages were reported in October 2021, along with shortages of many imported products. The Taliban has restricted withdrawals from banks. Food shortages are also reported across the country. In October 2021, sources reported estimates that Afghanistan may be 'two months from [economic] collapse'.

POLITICAL SYSTEM

2.11 The Taliban set up an 'interim government' in September and October 2021, with the announcement of some 88 appointments across 30 ministries. The occupants of these positions are mostly Pashtun and chiefly long-serving Taliban commanders with little relevant government experience. There are no women among them and few representatives of ethnic minorities. Many of these appointments continue to have parallel roles in the Taliban hierarchy. Despite the designation of 'interim,' there is no suggestion that it will be replaced with another 'government' through a different process. According to a number of media sources, the Taliban promised an 'inclusive' government that would be representative of Afghanistan's ethnicities. The Taliban claims it has fulfilled this by appointing a handful of Uzbeks (including Second Deputy Prime Minister Mawlawi Abdul Salam Hanafi), Tajiks and a single Hazara (Dr Mohammad Hassan Gheyasi, who was appointed Deputy Minister of Public Health) to mostly technical roles.

2.12 Several sources report that the Taliban is divided into factions of moderates and hardliners with different aims and expectations of governance. They report that the Taliban itself was surprised by the speed of its takeover and was ill-prepared for government. The loss of experienced bureaucrats (due to migration after the rise of the Taliban and the absence of salaries) and restrictions on women's employment have also further challenged the Taliban's ability to govern. The Taliban was also reportedly surprised by the negative reaction by many urban Afghans and protests against some of its rulings. Observers in neighbouring countries describe the Taliban as having a 'sense of entitlement' from having 'defeated a superpower' and that the Taliban had expected to be 'greeted as liberators'. The largely rural origins of the Taliban and their consequent limited experience made them ill-suited to the Afghanistan of 2021, in particular the large and relatively sophisticated city that Kabul has become. The capital's population has tripled in size since 1990 and now sits at approximately 4.2 million people, some of whom, including women, are highly educated.

2.13 Multiple sources emphasised the factional nature of the Taliban, with different sub-groups within the organisation competing for influence and control. These sources also emphasised that the Taliban's command-control structure, which proved effective for a fighting force, appears to be struggling to regulate the actions of tens of thousands of foot soldiers (and their regional commanders). This means that behaviour on the ground, including violence towards at-risk groups, may be inconsistent with proclamations from the central Taliban authorities, or may reflect local grievances.

2.14 Sources report that the most powerful faction within the Taliban, and also one of its most capable military forces, is the hardline Haqqani Network (HQN). The HQN, a Sunni Islamist militant organisation founded by Jalaluddin Haqqan, is responsible for some of the highest-profile attacks of the conflict in Afghanistan, and is listed by the United States as a terrorist organisation (unlike the Taliban as a whole, which is not so listed). Its leader, Sirajuddin Haqqani, son of the founder and wanted by the FBI, is the Taliban's new acting Interior Minister.

2.15 The Taliban seeks international recognition, the release of Afghan national funds held by the international banking system, and other countries' development assistance to meet the challenges facing Afghanistan. This process could take years. The Taliban also seeks the removal of United Nations and national terrorism-related sanctions and listings. International recognition could consolidate its domestic position.

SECURITY SITUATION

2.16 Whether the Taliban is sincere in its recent promises, such as offering an amnesty for former opponents, building an inclusive government and respecting women's rights, or whether such promises are given with the sole aim of encouraging international recognition, is a key question for observers. Sources suggest the Taliban has a history of telling international audiences what they want to hear while adhering to its authoritarian roots. On 20 February 2020, shortly before the conclusion of the Doha Agreement, Sirajuddin Haqqani, leader of the HQN and deputy leader of the Taliban, in an op-ed article in the New York Times entitled "What We, the Taliban, Want," described his desire that 'the killing and the maiming must stop' and wrote that the Taliban was 'committed to working with other parties in a consultative manner of genuine respect to agree on a new, inclusive political system in which the voice of every Afghan is reflected and where no Afghan feels excluded.'

2.17 Following the conclusion of the agreement and prior to taking power nationally on 15 August 2021, the Taliban launched what has been described as a 'wave of targeted killings' directed at 'influential and

prominent Afghans, including journalists, human rights activists, judicial workers, doctors and clerics'. According to UNAMA, 2020 recorded 'a 22 per cent increase in the number of civilians killed and injured by Taliban targeted killings, which includes "assassinations" deliberately targeting civilians, and a 169 per cent increase in civilian casualties occurring during abductions of civilians by the Taliban'. After the 15 August takeover, violence generally decreased across the country, although specific groups continue to be targeted by the Taliban and others (see [People associated with the government or international community, including security forces](#)).

2.18 Afghanistan is volatile but the country as a whole is (relatively) less dangerous than before August 2021 for many Afghans, due to the cessation of most armed conflict after the Taliban claimed victory. It nevertheless remains a dangerous country with ongoing threats of terrorism and kidnapping and other forms of violence. The Taliban asserted control over the entire country quickly and with relatively little opposition following the announcement of the US-led withdrawal of foreign forces.

2.19 After coming to power in mid-August 2021, the Taliban offered an amnesty to all Afghans, including those who had worked for the previous government (see [Recent History](#)). Observers report that this amnesty has been unevenly respected, with much of the violence following the takeover being the result of local score-settling. However, there have also been some targeted killings (see [People associated with the government or international community, including security forces](#)). Notably, in November 2021, Human Rights Watch documented that Taliban forces had killed or forcibly disappeared more than 100 former security force members in four provinces in the three months since their takeover on 15 August 2021.

2.20 There have been multiple mass-casualty terrorist attacks since the Taliban takeover, with most claimed by Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP). ISKP carried out dozens of terrorist attacks in 2020 and 2021 against the erstwhile Afghan national government and also the Taliban. Terrorist attacks remain possible anywhere in the country, but major attacks are most likely in key cities given the increased profile ISKP gets from such attacks.

2.21 Kabul remains insecure and has been subject to multiple attacks. On 2 November 2021, for example, at least 25 Afghans were killed and more than 50 injured when two large explosions hit Kabul's largest hospital, immediately followed by an assault by a group of gunmen. The attack was claimed by ISKP.

2.22 Local sources suggest parts of the country are returning to a 'normality' that has not been seen for many years; for example, bazaars that were closed due to war are reopening. This relative peace has meant travel by road across Afghanistan is generally safer than it has been for some time, albeit from a low base. It is likely to be less safe for women than for men.

2.23 The security situation is still evolving. It is unclear how long the current relative peace will continue, particularly if Afghanistan's economy collapses and the Taliban faces greater internal challenge. Sources have suggested that the Taliban is enjoying a 'honeymoon period' which will not endure. It is likely the terrorist attacks will continue and potentially increase. In addition to ISKP, there are numerous other, smaller militant groups and local leaders, many of whom had pledged their support for the Taliban, perceiving it as the likely winner of a conflict with the Afghan government. According to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), such local groups may 'hedge' their support for different leaders in response to the uncertainty.

Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP)

2.24 Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) is the Afghanistan offshoot of Daesh (also known as Islamic State or IS). It is strongly opposed to Shi'a Muslims and the West. Sources report that ISKP grew in strength in 2021, including through recruitment of disaffected Taliban members, as well as fighters released from prisons. According to reporting by the European Asylum Support Office in September 2021, the core ISKP group in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces retains around 2,000 fighters, mainly Afghan and Pakistani nationals, with smaller autonomous groups elsewhere in Afghanistan. A Taliban campaign in 2019 reduced their numbers by the thousands and removed their territorial control of a few districts in eastern Afghanistan. ISKP has claimed responsibility for the bombing at Kabul's Hamid Kharzai airport on 26 August 2021; the suicide bomb attack on a Shi'a mosque in Kunduz province on 8 October 2021, which killed more than 70 people, chiefly Hazaras; and another suicide bombing of a Shi'a mosque in Kandahar province, the Taliban's 'home' province, which killed 63 people on 15 October 2021, as well as the hospital bombing in Kabul on 2 November 2021 which killed 25. ISKP has also reportedly been responsible for dozens of smaller attacks since August 2021.

2.25 Sources report the ISKP and the Taliban have been in conflict for some time, while also locked in a fight with their mutual foes, the Afghan and US Governments. With the removal of these two targets, ISKP is now fighting the Taliban regime exclusively in Afghanistan, and the Taliban regards it as a clear threat. NGO sources report that ISKP targeted the funeral of the mother of the Taliban's chief spokesperson in Kabul in October 2021. ISKP derides the Taliban as 'apostates' and mocks its members as puppets of the Americans.

2.26 DFAT assesses that the security situation in Afghanistan remains dangerous. The cessation of conflict between the Taliban and the former administration has made many parts of the country, especially rural areas, effectively free from armed conflict; however, the situation is highly volatile. The ability of the Taliban to control violent actors is not currently clear. This applies particularly to ISKP but also its related entity, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, which targets Pakistan. There is significant potential for violence across the country, especially in the eastern provinces where ISKP is strongest.

3. REFUGEE CONVENTION CLAIMS

RACE/NATIONALITY

3.1 Ethnic, religious, tribal and family affiliations are important factors in almost every aspect of life in Afghanistan. Ethnic kinship is central to identity and acceptance in the community, and plays a crucial role in enabling Afghans to obtain shelter, employment and security. Afghans therefore tend to live in areas where their ethnic group constitutes the local majority. While the geographic distribution of ethnic groups is not uniform, and has been affected by the dynamics of the conflict, Pashtuns mostly live in the southern and eastern provinces, Hazaras in the central provinces, and Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmen in the northern provinces. Members of all ethnicities reside in Kabul and other major cities, but tend to live within their own communities.

Hazara

3.2 The Hazara are an ethnic group of distinctive East Asian appearance, native to the Hazarajat region of Afghanistan. Their language, Hazaragi, is a variety of Persian that is mutually intelligible with Dari. The Hazara are one of Afghanistan's fourteen recognised ethnic groups, estimated at around 10-20 per cent of Afghanistan's population. The majority of Hazara are Shi'a. The takeover of Kabul and most of Afghanistan by the predominantly Sunni and Pashtun Taliban in 1996 marked a period of considerable repression and hardship for the Hazara nationwide: the worst single recorded massacre in the country's recent history took place in Mazar-e-Sharif in August 1998, when the Taliban massacred at least 2,000 Hazara. Many Hazara fled Afghanistan during this period to escape Taliban oppression.

3.3 The Hazara made significant social, political, and economic gains in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, albeit from a low base. The return of the Taliban in 2021 was met with great fear by the Hazara community. The Hazara community regards the Taliban's promises of amnesty and inclusivity with scepticism. One member of the Hazara community has been appointed to a relatively minor position in the interim Taliban ministry (Dr Mohammad Hassan Gheyasi, who was appointed Deputy Minister of Public Health), but Hazaras are not otherwise represented in the interim Taliban government.

3.4 Two of ISKP's mass-casualty terror attacks, along with smaller attacks since mid-August 2021, have directly targeted Shi'ite mosques chiefly used by Hazaras. After the Kandahar attack of 15 October 2021, ISKP issued a statement saying it would target Shi'a in their homes and centres 'in every way, from slaughtering their necks to scattering their limbs... and the news of [ISIS's] attacks...in the temples of the [Shi'a] and their gatherings is not hidden from anyone, from Baghdad to Khorasan.' Sources report that the Taliban referred to the largely Shi'a victims of the Kunduz bombing of 8 October 2021 as having been 'martyred', indicating possible support for Hazara victims ordinarily derided by the Taliban as 'infidels' (and

therefore incapable of martyrdom). While the Taliban may be attempting to disrupt ISKP and prevent its attacks on Hazaras, this, along with the Taliban's professed amnesty, does not indicate that it has put aside its historical antipathy towards Hazaras. Since its takeover in August 2021, the Taliban has summarily executed Hazaras who were former members of the security forces (see [People associated with the former government or international community including security forces](#)). Furthermore, hundreds of Hazara families have been forcibly evicted from their homes in central Afghanistan. The Taliban claims these evictions are 'property disputes,' but NGOs have described them as a form of ethnic cleansing (although one source suggests these evictions may be the result of local score-settling, rather than ethnically-based).

3.5 DFAT assesses that Hazaras in Afghanistan face a high risk of harassment and violence from both the Taliban and ISKP, on the basis of their ethnicity and sectarian affiliation. While the level of mistreatment of Hazaras is currently less widespread than was predicted by some sources upon the fall of Kabul, members of the Hazara community have suffered from ISKP terror attacks and Taliban violence, including hundreds of evictions.

Other ethnic groups

3.6 Outside of Hazaras, DFAT is not aware that other ethnic groups in Afghanistan face discrimination or violence on the basis of their ethnicity, despite the dominance of Pashtuns within the Taliban. Armed resistance to the Taliban, including at the last hold-outs in the Panjshir Valley, has ended, so there is limited potential for future challenge to the Taliban in the near term, including from various 'ethnic warlords'. These include Atta Mohammad Noor, an ethnic Tajik; General Abdul Rashid Dostum, of Uzbek descent; and Ahmad Massoud, also a Tajik. DFAT assesses that people from these ethnic groups may face some risks of harassment from the Taliban if they are associated with any military threat, should it emerge.

RELIGION

3.7 Virtually all Afghans (approximately 99 per cent) identify as Muslim. Around 85 per cent of the Muslim community is Sunni, and around 15 per cent Shi'a. While small communities of other faiths once lived in Afghanistan (including Jews, Christians, Sikhs, Hindus and Baha'i), virtually none remain today.

Shi'a

3.8 The overwhelming majority of Afghan Shi'a are Hazara, although a small number of Hazara are Sunni. There are also some Shi'a from other ethnic groups, including some Pashtun, Tajiks and Turkic peoples. The Taliban, ISKP, Al-Qa'ida and most other terrorist/insurgent forces in Afghanistan are Sunni. While Sunni and Shi'a Muslims have lived side-by-side for much of Afghanistan's history, religious hardliners such as the Taliban typically do not consider Shi'a to be true Muslims.

3.9 DFAT assesses that Shi'a face a high risk of being targeted by ISKP and other militant groups on the basis of their religious affiliation when assembling in large and identifiable groups, such as during demonstrations or when attending mosques during major religious festivals. This risk increases for those living in Shi'a majority or ethnic Hazara neighbourhoods in major cities such as Kabul and Herat.

Ahmadis

3.10 The Ahmadis are members of an Islamic messianic movement that began in British-controlled India in the late 19th century. They self-identify as followers of Islam, but their teachings are widely regarded as heretical by Sunnis and Shi'a. According to one report, in August 2021 when the Taliban took over, there were 450 Ahmadis in Afghanistan. Reports suggest that, in December 2021, at least some remained and that more than 20 had been detained, beaten or threatened by the Taliban.

POLITICAL OPINION (ACTUAL OR IMPUTED)

Opposition to the Taliban

3.11 As of late 2021, the Taliban's control over Afghanistan is essentially complete, with the exception of its inability to prevent terrorism by ISKP and others. No other significant armed opposition remains within the country at the time of writing, although 'ethnic warlords' may present a future challenge (see [Other Ethnic Groups](#)). After 2001, a significant range of CSOs, NGOs, independent media and human rights defenders emerged in Afghanistan, with a commitment to a more pluralistic political environment. A number of these were targeted for assassination by the Taliban in the lead-up to its takeover in August 2021 (see [Security Situation](#)). Despite the purported amnesty subsequently offered by the Taliban, such groups remain fearful, with many individuals and families either fleeing the country or going into hiding.

GROUPS OF INTEREST

Women

3.12 During the late 1990s when the Taliban held power in Afghanistan for the first time, they imposed their interpretation of Sharia (Islamic law) upon the country, with a particularly negative impact on women. Women and girls were largely barred from public life without the accompaniment of a male relative, and were excluded from schools and universities entirely. Following 2001, the position of women improved markedly. During the time of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Government (2001-21), women made significant progress in education, employment and political representation. In 2003, fewer than 10 per cent of girls were enrolled in primary schools. By 2017, that number had grown to 33 per cent, while female enrolment in secondary education grew from 6 per cent in 2003 to 39 per cent in 2017. Women's life expectancy also grew from 56 years in 2001 to 66 in 2017, and their mortality during childbirth declined by two thirds. In 2020, 21 per cent of Afghan civil servants were women, and 27 per cent of Afghan members of parliament were women. However, these benefits chiefly accrued to urban rather than rural women.

3.13 Violence against women, particularly domestic violence, is widespread in Afghanistan. While a law to eliminate violence against women (EVAW) was finally confirmed in 2018, nine years after it was first decreed by the then-President, implementation by the justice sector remained elusive, demonstrating the background cultural resistance in Afghanistan to women's rights. So-called 'honour killings' occur frequently in Afghanistan, particularly in rural areas, where judicial authorities often condone them.

3.14 Since its takeover in August 2021, the Taliban has made promises with regard to inclusivity and women's rights. At its first press conference, the spokesperson for the Taliban claimed: 'Our sisters, our men have the same rights; they will be able to benefit from their rights.' However, many sources regard this promise as having been made for the benefit of the international community. The spokesperson further qualified that such rights exist 'within the framework of Sharia law', which is subject to the Taliban's conservative view of Islam and the role of women within it. In December 2021, the Taliban issued a decree barring forced marriage in Afghanistan, and stating that women should not be considered "property". However, it remains to be seen to what extent the decree will be implemented.

3.15 Many sources regard the Taliban as having already broken its promises, and that it is in the process of returning women to the position they were in between 1996 and 2001. While the Taliban has promised an 'inclusive' government, none of the almost 90 government appointments made so far includes a single woman. The Taliban has delivered mixed messages about women in the workplace and in education. For example, Amnesty International reports that on 24 August 2021, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid told reporters women should refrain from showing up to work until 'proper systems' were put in place. A few days later, another Taliban spokesperson tweeted that women working in the health sector were to report to duty.

3.16 In November 2021, the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice issued guidelines requiring female reporters to wear hijab and calling on TV stations to stop broadcasting soap operas featuring women. In December, the same ministry said women should not travel unaccompanied for more than 72 kilometres without being accompanied by a male family member and that vehicle owners should refuse to carry women not wearing headscarves. The UN reports that unaccompanied women are being denied access to taxis and other 'public transport' in Kabul. In December 2021, a women's protest in Kabul was disrupted by Taliban fighters firing guns in the air. There have also been reports of female judges and lawyers receiving death threats from convicts freed by the Taliban, leading many of these women to flee the country. The current situation has added increasing pressure on women-headed households, particularly where these women are unable to move freely or are not permitted to work.

3.17 While the Taliban have permitted girls to attend primary schools, secondary schools for girls have been closed and women are not permitted to attend public universities. Some women continue to attend private universities, while girls' high schools remained open in a number of provinces as at December 2021. Sources suggest that the mixed messages and inconsistent policies are a result of the organisation trying to balance internal factions while attempting to placate the international community to achieve regime recognition. One result of this balancing act is that the Taliban makes promises with regard to women that leaders know are very unlikely to be fulfilled; for example, promising that women can attend public universities if they are fully sex-segregated when there are insufficient facilities and female teachers.

3.18 Despite the mixed messages in some areas, other changes by the Taliban are less ambiguous. According to Human Rights Watch, the Taliban has banned women's sport; dismantled the system to protect women from violence, including at home; closed shelters for women and girls fleeing violence, which Afghan activists had fought for years to put in place; and dismantled the specialised courts and prosecution units that had been set up to enforce the EAW law. Furthermore, the Taliban has abolished the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and handed that ministry's headquarters over to the new Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, whose predecessor was responsible for much punitive violence between 1996 and 2001, particularly towards women.

3.19 DFAT assesses that women in Afghanistan, regardless of ethnicity or socio-economic status, face a high risk of official discrimination and a high risk of societal discrimination. DFAT assesses that Afghan

women continue to face a high risk of gender-based violence, including sexual assault and domestic violence, while Afghan girls face a high risk of being forced into early or involuntary marriage. DFAT further assesses that women face a high risk of harassment and violence from the Taliban if they depart from traditional female roles. While the Taliban has been relatively restrained as of late 2021—for example permitting women to protest in the street on some occasions (while resorting to violence on other occasions)—there is a risk such comparative restraint could end at any time. DFAT assesses that the situation of women in Afghanistan, with regards to access to employment, education and healthcare services, is precarious; such access that exists may be altered or withdrawn by the Taliban with little warning or reason given.

Children

3.20 According to UNICEF, as at September 2021, 9.7 million Afghan children were in need of humanitarian assistance. Half of all children aged under five (3.2 million children) are at risk of acute malnutrition.

3.21 Child abuse is a common problem throughout Afghanistan, and may include general neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, abandonment, and confined forced labour to pay off family debts. Sexual abuse of children is pervasive – NGOs have reported that extended family members often abuse girls, while men more frequently abuse boys outside their families. There have been credible reports of religious figures sexually abusing children of both sexes, and of police beating and sexually abusing children who complained of sexual abuse. In 2019, an NGO in Logar province reportedly discovered the abuse of over 500 boys from six schools by a paedophile ring. According to the NGO, several families killed their sons after their faces were revealed on social media. The US Department of State 2020 report on human rights practices in Afghanistan states that the Taliban and other actors have recruited children as soldiers and suicide bombers.

3.22 The practice of *bacha bazi* (dancing boys) involves young boys dancing in female attire for audiences of adult males, after which sexual abuse (including gang rape) often occurs. Many of the boys are reportedly either kidnapped or sold by their impoverished families. *Bacha bazi* is not widely seen as homosexual behaviour, but rather as a cultural practice. The Taliban reputedly opposes the practice and outlawed it during its previous regime, however the practice reportedly returned following the US-led coalition presence in Afghanistan.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

3.23 In addition to legal constraints, strict social and cultural taboos severely constrain an individual's freedom to identify publicly as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI). Same-sex orientation and unconventional gender identities are linked in the public imagination with prostitution and paedophilia, due in part to the longstanding cultural tradition of *bacha bazi*. While the Taliban has not indicated how it will enforce its strict laws against Afghanistan's largely hidden LGBTI community, the community is fearful. In July 2021, a Taliban judge said that there were only two appropriate punishments for same-sex relationships: stoning or being crushed under a wall.

3.24 DFAT assesses that LGBTI individuals face a high risk of official discrimination and violence, including by entrapment, arrest, harassment and mistreatment by the Taliban and other authorities. DFAT assesses that they also face a high risk of societal discrimination and violence.

People associated with the government or international community, including security forces

3.25 The Taliban have targeted Afghans of all ethnicities working for, supporting, or associated with the government and/or the international community. This includes, but is not limited to, government employees, judges and prosecutors, judicial workers, police, Afghan and international security force personnel, and interpreters. Such people were subject to intimidation, threats, abduction, and targeted killings, in a wave of violence that followed the Doha Agreement.

3.26 At its first press conference since taking over in August 2021, the Taliban declared an amnesty, stating it had ‘pardoned anyone, all those who had fought against us. We don’t want to repeat any conflict anymore again. We want to do away with the factors for conflict. Therefore, the Islamic Emirate does not have any kind of hostility or animosity with anybody.’ Observers suggest that, as at late 2021, the Taliban was unevenly respecting this amnesty, with some subsequent violence being the result of local vendettas.

3.27 Despite the amnesty, since August 2021 there are signs that some Taliban forces are actively targeting members of the Afghanistan Government’s security forces, particularly those adjudged to be impossible to recruit to the Taliban’s cause: namely former Special Forces soldiers and members of the National Directorate of Security (NDS), along with those who specifically aided foreign forces. Sources variously report four members of the NDS were hunted, tortured and killed in September 2021; a pregnant former policewoman was stabbed to death in front of her family; and nine Hazara members of the Afghan National Defence Security Forces (ANDSF) were killed in Daykundi Province (along with four civilians either fleeing or caught in cross-fire) after they surrendered. In November 2021, Human Rights Watch documented that Taliban forces had killed or forcibly disappeared more than 100 former security force members in four provinces since their takeover on 15 August 2021, as well as threatening their family members. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights also said her office had received ‘credible allegations of reprisal killings of a number of former ANDSF personnel, and reports of civilians who worked for previous administrations and their family members being arbitrarily detained.’

3.28 Former Afghan interpreters and other locally-engaged personnel who assisted US or other allied forces have also reportedly been subject to Taliban violence: in October 2021, a former Afghan soldier who worked as an interpreter for the Australian Defence Force was reportedly murdered by the Taliban, while in July, a former interpreter for US forces was stopped at a Taliban checkpoint in Khost as he tried to flee and was beheaded. DFAT cannot verify if they were killed due to their previous role assisting allied forces or for another reason.

3.29 Sources report that the Taliban now possesses biometric data collected by the United States with respect to Afghan security forces. If true, this data, which reportedly includes iris scans, fingerprints and facial images, may assist the Taliban in tracking down and punishing former Afghan service members. DFAT is unable to verify whether this is occurring. (See also [Identification](#).) DFAT notes, however, that lower and mid-level ordinary officials within the Afghanistan government have been ordered back to work in order to help run the country.

3.30 DFAT assesses there is a high risk that former Afghan security forces, especially special forces and NDS personnel, may be subject to violence from the Taliban. DFAT assesses that other former government officials who were openly critical of the Taliban or harmful to Taliban interests (such as judges or police responsible for imprisoning Taliban soldiers) are also at moderate to high risk of unwanted attention, detention, harassment and violence. Due to the Taliban’s desire to restart Afghan governance and curry

favour with the international community, ordinary and/or technical government officials are presently assessed to be at low risk of adverse Taliban attention.

Human Rights Defenders and Civil Society

3.31 Shortly after it took over in August 2021, the Taliban issued an amnesty for all potential opponents; it also expressed a wish to govern in an inclusive fashion (see [Political System](#)). During its previous period of rule (1996-2001), the Taliban permitted civil society organisations (CSOs) and NGOs to deliver aid but otherwise severely restricted their activities, including by banning the employment of Afghan women in domestic and international NGOs, and by mandating a cumbersome and arbitrary registration process for NGOs. In 1998, for example, 38 international NGOs suspected by the Taliban of involvement in political activity were expelled from Afghanistan. In November 2021, it was reported that the Taliban did not approve female aid workers to operate in some provinces, while approving them in others. As of late November 2021, one large international organisation reported that 75 per cent of its local female staff were back in the office.

3.32 Before August 2021, the Taliban openly targeted Afghans of all ethnicities working for, supporting or associated with the government and/or the international community. This included, in some circumstances, aid workers and NGO employees. Such people were subject to intimidation, threats, abduction and targeted killings (see [Security Situation](#)). On taking over in August 2021, the Taliban promised an amnesty for all and security for ‘international organisations [and] aid agencies’, among others. Sources indicate that the Taliban would like NGOs and CSOs to resume providing services to the Afghan people, at least partly to compensate for its own limitations in governance. In September 2021, Taliban gave written assurances to the head of the UN Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) that it would abide by humanitarian principles on safe passage and freedom of movement for humanitarian workers. Activities outside service delivery, and anything that crosses into what the Taliban may consider ‘political’ territory, including promotion of any form of human rights, are unlikely to be tolerated.

3.33 DFAT assesses that NGO/CSO workers engaged in service delivery are at a low risk of harassment by the Taliban, although female workers will typically be at a higher risk. DFAT further assesses that human rights defenders and CSO/NGO workers engaged in activity considered ‘political’ by the Taliban are at moderate risk of harassment, arbitrary detention and violence.

Media

3.34 Afghanistan’s media sector has expanded significantly since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001. During its previous rule, the Taliban banned all independent media, outlawed television, and permitted only government-run radio stations (which broadcast only religious programs and news). In 2021, before the Taliban took over, the media sector was described by Reporters without Borders as ‘vibrant, with multiple outlets in print, radio, and television that collectively carry a wide range of views and are generally uncensored’. In addition, many Afghans are active social media users, subject to the limitations of Afghanistan’s internet coverage (only about 14 per cent of Afghans have access, chiefly in the cities).

3.35 Since the takeover in August 2021, once again with the likely aim of placating the international community, the Taliban signalled a different approach from that of the late 1990s, holding a press conference for domestic and international media and promising ‘media can continue to be free and



independent, they can continue their activities’. On 23 November, the Taliban released a set of guidelines and restrictions on the media, some directed specifically at women journalists (see [Women](#)).

3.36 While a number of journalists continue to work, there are clear signs that Taliban tolerance of a free media is limited. Only one in seven female journalists is still working, with the rest dismissed/unemployed, in hiding or having fled Afghanistan. Local sources claim journalists have been beaten while attempting to report on demonstrations in Kabul and other cities. For example, two journalists working for daily newspaper *Etilaat Roz* were taken by the Taliban in September 2021 and whipped with cables. Taliban soldiers, who were reportedly searching for three Deutsche Welle reporters, killed the relative of one and injured another during a house-to-house search on 19 August 2021. Reporters without Borders claims that around 100 media outlets have stopped operating since the Taliban takeover, while hundreds of Afghan journalists have either gone into hiding or fled the country.

3.37 DFAT assesses that journalists in Afghanistan face a high risk of harassment by the Taliban, which may include violence. Taliban promises of media freedom are qualified by its expectation that reporting must be in accordance with the Taliban’s understanding of Sharia law. This means much reporting will be deemed unacceptable by the Taliban and may provoke a severe reaction.

4. OTHER ISSUES

IDENTIFICATION

4.1 The *taskira* is the primary form of identification for Afghan citizens. *Taskiras* act as the primary document necessary to obtain other forms of identification including passports. They are also required for employment and admission to schools and universities, to obtain approval to run a business, and to buy, rent and sell property. According to the UK Home Office, from 2018 the Government of Afghanistan began to issue a new form of the paper *taskira* (printed in colour) as well a digital version. The new e-*taskira* cards were launched in May 2018 and contain a watermark security feature and microchip to comply with international standards for electronic identity documents. The e-*taskira* is a rectangular plastic card that includes the bearer's photograph and signature. Earlier *taskiras* were printed on plain paper, either in black-and-white or colour, depending on the date of issue. Other than stamped seals, they do not include any security features. Issuing officers at district population registration offices completed paper-based *taskiras* manually. The biographical information in them varies according to the individual issuing officer and is often incomplete.

4.2 It is not known what will become of either version of the *taskira* under the Taliban. Local sources say the Taliban has undertaken to continue issuing them, on paper only, but the level of integrity underlying the system is unclear. Furthermore, DFAT assesses it is unlikely the Taliban will be willing or able to maintain the digital e-*taskira* system. In September 2021, the Taliban announced it would be issuing its own *taskiras* and passports including the words 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' but that it would continue to recognise *taskiras* and passports issued by the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. As at December 2021, the Taliban was issuing passports using the old document format.

RELOCATION/TRAVEL

4.3 Over 100,000 Afghans—many of them members of vulnerable cohorts—fled Afghanistan in the airlifts organised by allied governments, including Australia, out of Kabul in the weeks after the city fell to the Taliban. Sources claim the Taliban allowed many of its enemies, chiefly former members of the ASNDF, to depart, when it might have stopped them. Kabul (Hamid Kharzai) airport has since opened to limited air traffic during daylight hours, with assistance from Turkish and Qatari technical teams, but it does not meet International Civil Aviation Organization standards and scheduled commercial flights have not resumed. Scheduled flights from Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) and two other airlines recommenced in late 2021 but were suspended in mid-October. PIA claimed the suspension was due to delays caused by 'the unprofessional attitude of the Kabul aviation authorities'. The Taliban claimed it was ordering the airline to cut ticket prices (which were very high) to the levels preceding the fall of the Western-backed Afghan government in August. As of January 2022, there is limited capacity for Afghans to depart internationally by



air. The national carrier, Ariana Airlines, reportedly resumed some international flights, along with domestic flights to Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif and Kandahar, in late 2021.

4.4 With the Taliban takeover, armed conflict in Afghanistan has essentially ceased for the first time in years, and road travel across Afghanistan is possible and relatively safe for the general population compared with risks in previous years. (Specific risks remain for certain groups, as outlined above, including in particular women.) Sources suggest a number of Afghans have been travelling by land to the various border crossings. These crossings are sometimes open and sometimes closed, and sometimes permit only a small number of people to cross the border. Some border crossing points that are open are at risk of terrorist attack. Neighbouring countries are wary of admitting large number of potential refugees while the Taliban is reportedly becoming reluctant to permit a 'brain drain' of skilled Afghans needed to run the government.