



Our Journeys

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A Short Visit to the Taliban's Tense and Quiet Capital

The future of Afghanistan remains deeply uncertain – mostly because the Taliban have not decided what path they will chart for their new government, as Crisis Group expert Graeme Smith discovered in Kabul.

The Taliban are still finding their way around Kabul, the capital they took with the rest of Afghanistan last summer, and some of the former insurgents look a bit lost as they adapt to new lives as government officials. On a recent day, an armoured vehicle with black government licence plates arrived at a large supermarket, a local landmark. The Taliban official behind the wheel – a Pashto-speaking out-of-towner – struggled with Persian, a language of government here for centuries, as he asked a guard, “Is this a supermarket?” The guard looked up theatrically at billboards of fruits and vegetables and the word “supermarket” in the signage. “Is this a supermarket?”, he grumbled, repeating the phrase under his breath. His mockery was barely audible; residents know it’s not a good idea to upset the city’s new masters.

It’s not just that the Taliban are disoriented by the jumble of streets, unsure of the urban landscape they have conquered. More broadly, many still talk with amazement about the fall of the previous government last August, and a few of them admit feeling daunted by the task of running the national government after emerging from the countryside where they fought for decades. In some ways, they are faring better than at any point in their lives, breathing easy

without the threat of U.S. airstrikes, cruising around the city in expensive vehicles with accessories in hand: the latest iPhone, U.S.-made assault rifles. But their duties also weigh heavily. “It’s better here than in the mountains”, said a Taliban official, strolling past the flowerbeds inside a ministry compound. “But we did not imagine the government would be this big. We thought it was a few thousand people, but we got here and discovered that it’s hundreds of thousands”.

I myself am still figuring out how to navigate the new Afghanistan, after recently returning with my colleague Ibraheem Bahiss for a short visit. We had been away for years, since the pandemic started, and we were curious to see whether we could resume the first-hand research that our organisation had been conducting in Afghanistan since 2002. We approached the question cautiously, having learned to mistrust first impressions. Over and over in recent decades, outsiders like myself have failed to understand what is happening in this country. On this occasion, our view of the situation was coloured by the way we landed in Kabul, with permission from the Taliban and carrying foreign passports, and we knew that a two-week trip allowed only the smallest window into a complicated situation.

Still, we took away a few impressions. The first thing is the remarkable degree of calm that has settled over Kabul, despite recent attacks. The relative quiet is something you feel almost every moment of the day. I slept with the windows open and the only sounds I heard at night were the calls to prayer, a contrast with previous years when I grew accustomed to gunfire or the roar of low-flying helicopters in the darkness. Body searches at the entrances to many

buildings have been downgraded from intense screenings to quick pat-downs or a desultory shrug. My room overlooked a roundabout near the presidential palace, a place where security forces used to yell through megaphones to warn off vehicles. It was now guarded by a few Taliban fighters slumped silently in office chairs. Parts of that intersection were flattened by a truck bombing in 2017, the kind of mass-casualty attack that has now become less

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common. Down the street was the Emergency Hospital, the city's best trauma ward, run by a valiant Italian charity, a place where relatives of war victims thronged at the gates when the violence was at its height. At the time of our visit, the wards were getting only a trickle of gunshot cases, mostly a result of the rising crime rate, nothing like the carnage of previous years.

Not that the killing has stopped altogether. Soon after we departed Kabul, the sound of explosions boomed over the city again as an affiliate of the Islamic State group continued its intense campaign of terrorism against the Hazara, an ethnic and religious minority, and other minority groups such as Sufis, whom the extremists hate. More than 100 people were killed in a particularly bloody two weeks in April; this death toll paled in comparison to the one a year earlier, when daily casualties often exceeded that number, but it underlined the persistence of insecurity. The Taliban have

been battling the local Islamic State affiliate since it emerged in 2015, but the group still inflicts mayhem, and such vio-

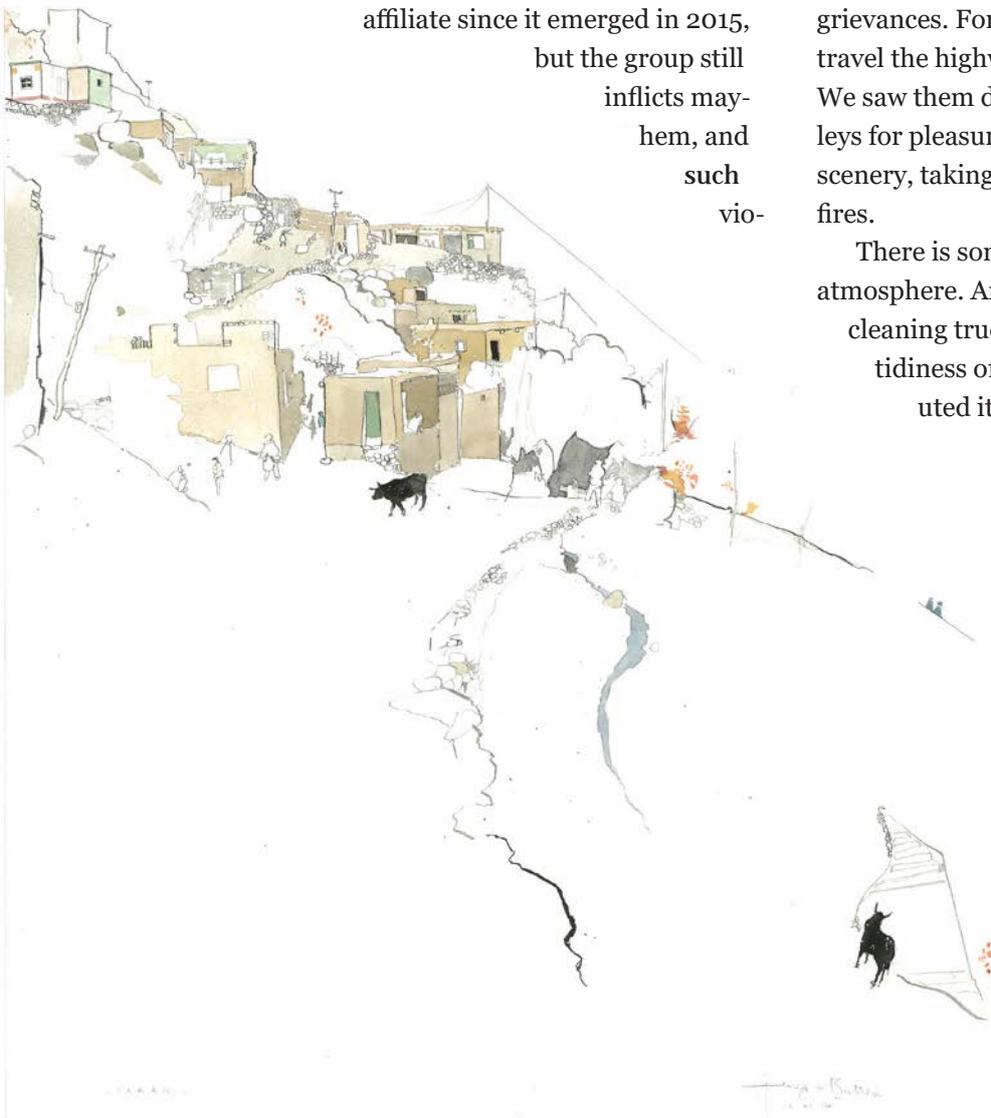
lence will not be easy to quell: in the 1990s, the Taliban struggled for years against earlier militant Salafist groups in the east – the same terrain where the Islamic State affiliate now fights the Taliban.

From the northern provinces, as well, reports have emerged of attacks by anti-Taliban insurgents claimed by a dozen or so groups connected with parts of the previous government, which the Taliban toppled last August. The Taliban view these claims as exaggerated, although Taliban spokesmen sometimes admit they face large numbers of resistance fighters. It's hard for analysts to get reliable information about the number of attacks and casualties; the UN's latest report found a 91 per cent decrease in violence from the previous year, and a U.S. intelligence report predicted that the Taliban "will maintain control", but their data are difficult to verify. Former Afghan military officials are promising further anti-Taliban attacks as the new government's repression generates grievances. For now, though, the Taliban still travel the highways with little personal security. We saw them driving north into the green valleys for pleasure, enjoying picnics in the alpine scenery, taking selfies and grilling over campfires.

There is something eerie about the placid atmosphere. An old friend pointed to a street-cleaning truck and admitted that he likes the tidiness of the new Kabul, but he attributed it to the economic downturn:

"Nobody can afford petrol, so the roads are not so busy".

It's true that business has slowed – the need for economic revival is a major focus of Crisis Group's research – but that's not the only explanation for the sleepiness. A troubling aspect of the subdued mood is the reduction in the number of women in public. I had walked



the central neighbourhoods for years and routinely passed women in full burkas, colourful hijabs and, in a few cases, no headscarves at all. This time, I didn't see a single woman showing her hair and I saw remarkably few women in general. The biggest gatherings of women were crowds of beggars asking for handouts at bakeries. The scene looked nothing like the rollicking Kabul of previous years, so different from surrounding villages that it was nicknamed the "Kabubble". In many countries, life in cities is very different from that in the countryside, but in Afghanistan the contrast was especially stark. Now the bubble has burst, leaving Kabul more like the rest of the impoverished country.

Even the conservatism that I saw on the streets was not enough to satisfy the Taliban leadership. After our departure, they issued new edicts demanding stricter adherence to dress codes for women. A Taliban ruling requires that women cover themselves from head to toe, including their faces: in other words, millions of Afghan women woke up to discover that their clothing is illegal, that the outfits that their mothers and grandmothers had worn for generations were banned. The rules might seem uncontroversial to many people in the villages of southern Afghanistan that produced the Taliban, mirroring local customs and reflecting mainstream views among the Taliban of religious requirements. But in other parts of the country, especially urban neighbourhoods, the new requirements are seen as outrageous. Some Taliban described the rules as a compromise, allowing variations of dress other than conservative burkas. Other Taliban wish that their colleagues would only advise citizens instead of forcing them to wear different outfits, but in practice these Taliban officials seem less powerful than the more extreme social conservatives in their movement. Enforcement seems to be happening: Taliban officials claim

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to be deploying thousands of religious officers to ensure compliance.

The growing number of regulations governing personal conduct has started to give the new regime a greater resemblance – superficially, at least – to the Taliban government of the 1990s. Recent months have witnessed Taliban decisions blocking unaccompanied Afghan women from aircraft; instructing broadcasters to stop airing international news in local languages; announcing separate times for men and women to visit parks and universities; instructing teachers and students not to wear neckties; and imposing other restrictions.

The Taliban's zeal for regulation also includes a close watch over the behaviour of their own personnel. Under previous governments, navigating traffic often involved steering away from convoys of politicians, senior officials and other powerful figures who rode in armoured vehicles with sirens blaring and cruised through checkpoints with their government licence plates. Now it's less common to see official vehicles getting preferential treatment; in fact, Taliban at checkpoints seem extra attentive as they check fellow Taliban. Guards wave down their comrades and scrutinise credentials, looking carefully at the laminated cards that identify officials from the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

One explanation for the intensity of Taliban checks of their own colleagues might be the new regime's determination to fight corruption. Early data on customs and tax revenues suggest a clean-up of graft under the Taliban. They are also confiscating unregistered weapons, and some Taliban told us that checking Taliban vehicles prevents the theft or misuse of government property. (One such "misuse" of Taliban weapons may include revenge killings of people connected with the former government.) A Taliban official touted the wide application of these new measures as evidence that theirs is an egalitarian movement. He noted that a senior Taliban figure was recently photographed making the day-long journey on a passenger bus from southern Afghanistan to the capital.



“We are not afraid of the people, unlike the last government”, he said.

Perhaps there is a sense in which the Taliban behave with more humility than their predecessors: as we spoke, the Taliban official was waiting at an iftar buffet in a busy restaurant, where crowds of men who had been fasting all day thronged around steaming dishes. The Taliban official was powerful enough to skip the line, but he said that the government tries to avoid alienating people. He waited an hour before getting a full plate.

All the same, many people do feel alienated – or, indeed, much worse, in case of many women, girls and minorities. Nor is there anything humble about the way Taliban decision-makers shield themselves from public scrutiny. Most of the new government belongs to the secretive upper echelons of the Taliban movement, predominately ethnic Pashtun and entirely male. They have not clarified under what constitution or according to what laws they will govern, although a legal review is rumoured to be progressing rapidly. Their

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heavy-handed restrictions on the media suggest a regime that is not comfortable answering questions: several journalists have been beaten and arrested, and others expelled from the country.

As a result, the tone of Afghan media coverage has become more cautious. Some days, the lead story on a local news platform will be the results of a cricket match, a worrying sign in a country where important events are unfolding. At the same time, as Afghanistan falls down the rankings of press freedom, the country still rates better than most of its neighbours. In one of the largest newsrooms the number of women has increased – although they are now forced to cover their faces. Chat shows sometimes feature Taliban debating people who disagree with them, a surreal contrast with previous years when such differences played out on the battlefield and not under the lights of a television studio.

Still, the real arguments about policy seem to be happening far away from the spotlight, among senior clerics in Kandahar, and it’s often difficult to guess what’s coming next from the reclusive leadership. During our visit, we did not meet a single person who supported the Taliban decision in March to shutter girls’ secondary schools, but none of the Taliban leaders who made the ruling have explained themselves in public. Taliban officials often told me that “good news is coming” allowing teenage girls to resume their schooling, but these officials did not seem to know (or were unwilling to say) when that might happen or how exactly their movement formulates policy. One of the most powerful figures in government, Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani, recently repeated the promise of “good news” in a television interview. His statement gave hope to millions

of girls who want an education, but it also sent a confusing message: if Haqqani was waiting for news, who was making the decisions? That even the most senior officials cannot explain the factors that influence policy, or elucidate the restrictions under which girls will be allowed to return to school in the future, offers little assurance to Afghans. It also leads to befuddlement among the diplomats who must report back to their capitals about how to understand Taliban claims.

The confusion over how the government runs itself became a little more understandable after we visited a few ministry offices. Taliban officials say they retained all staff who want to keep working, keeping the existing roster of 440,000 personnel with only about 4,000 new appointees. This estimate probably understates the number of new officials, while inflating the payroll, but the upshot is that Afghan institutions are now hybrids of old and new. Cooperation is not always easy between officials who until recently served on opposite sides of what was the world’s deadliest war. After the ugly toll of the conflict in previous years, it’s astonishing that these officials can work side by side at all – but they do, and we noticed that civil servants hired under previous governments sometimes feel confident enough to take the lead in meetings, while their Taliban colleagues take notes.

Some former officials are not so confident of the Taliban’s tolerance and the new regime’s blanket amnesty, which should protect all ex-government staff, in theory: one person I met in Kabul had burned all documents that linked him to the previous administration and he lives in fear. Reprisal killings against members of the previous government are concentrated mostly among sections of the former security forces, however. For most civil servants, life

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under the Taliban is more about adapting to the new bosses and worrying about keeping their salaries. Pay scales have been reduced as the new regime grapples with financial constraints; the latest budget anticipates a deficit of \$500 million, with no indication of how the Taliban will make up the shortfall. A Taliban official told us that staff cuts might be required, which could be painful in a country where the government is the largest employer, in the middle of a hunger crisis.

Everywhere we turned, it was obvious that the country is in dire economic straits. I walked past familiar stores with the metal shutters rolled down. Tens of millions of lives hang in the balance as Afghanistan teeters on the brink of famine, with more starving people than anywhere in the world. Afghans cannot survive forever on emergency handouts which will no doubt diminish when UN and other humanitarian agencies scale back the massive operations they’re running this year. Pulling back from the precipice of a more profound disaster will require ending the country’s isolation, attracting development aid, and persuading Western and regional governments to help with economic recovery. Crisis Group has recommended that donors invest in regional stability by easing sanctions, returning frozen assets, reviving the central bank and encouraging financial institutions to resume transactions with Afghanistan. We have called for the World Bank and other development actors to re-engage to sustain essential services. In short, we have been urging the world not to exile this impoverished population to the economic wilderness.

Unfortunately, the Taliban themselves may choose a path of isolation. Of course, isolation is not official Taliban policy: their diplomats and spokesmen continue working for international recognition, trying to bridge the gap between themselves and most of the world. It’s a chasm that may grow, however, if the Taliban push ahead with social regulations that make outside

engagement with the regime politically toxic. The first major test with implications for foreign assistance beyond short-term humanitarian relief was the reopening of girls’ secondary schools back in March – a test the Taliban failed in front of a global audience, with the last-minute decision to shut teenage girls out of classrooms. Television crews that hoped to record an historic moment of post-war compromise instead witnessed crying girls turned away from the gates of their schools. That triggered the suspension of hundreds of millions of dollars in World Bank assistance; more broadly, international donors grew more concerned about how to engage with Taliban leaders who seem wary of influences from the outside world.

Deeper engagement with the Taliban is urgently required, in part because Afghanistan is not well equipped to handle the price increases expected in the coming months for food, fuel and fertiliser as a result of the war in Ukraine. But any efforts to find technical solutions will matter less than the political direction that the Taliban choose for themselves and the country. The Taliban have won the war and the current lull in violence represents one of the most peaceful moments in generations. They now exercise more territorial control than any single political actor has enjoyed since the 1970s. Nobody in the country has more power than the Taliban, but our conversations with them suggested that they are still considering how to use it. Some of them told us that the outlines of their “Islamic system” have not yet been defined.

Some observers of the Taliban who worked in the country during their previous regime have predicted, with deep cynicism, that such questions will never get answered – that, as in the 1990s, the Taliban will remain cloaked in obscurantism. Personally, I’m less convinced that we can discern the Taliban’s overall direction at this stage. Serious debates are now happening among senior Taliban in a way that

would have been unthinkable in previous years. As the lead UN envoy said recently: “They have not yet truly defined how they plan to move the country forward, how in fact they’re even making decisions”. I tend to agree with the well-known journalist in Kabul who referred to an internal struggle between the past and

future, as some Taliban stalwarts look back to a version of their previous regime and others look forward to something new, possibly a Taliban government that finds a better way of relating to its citizens and the world. Like so many people who are bewildered by the new Afghanistan, the Taliban are still finding their way. ■



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