



Taliban Participates in United Nations-Led Talks on Afghanistan Held in Qatar

Several years into the Taliban's takeover of the government functions of Afghanistan, the effects of the regime's oppressive rule continue to wreak havoc on the lives of everyday citizens. The human rights violations committed by the Taliban are many, and women have been reduced to second-class citizens. They have been prevented from exercising basic human rights such as freedom of movement, assembly, work, and education. These bans have also been expanded to ensure that women do not hold positions of power by barring them from NGOs and positions of public office. The United Nations has labeled the situation as "gender apartheid." This label is, by all accounts from human rights groups, accurate. Women have been barred from an education past 6th grade and nearly all career opportunities, and the Taliban continues to chip away at what little women are still able to do. These bans have undermined many important sectors and have led to increased levels of poverty, decreased aid, and slowed economic growth. The few women who have managed to retain their jobs are deemed essential, such as healthcare workers, but even then, these women face extreme hardships as they attempt to carry out their work.

The Taliban have also targeted journalists, activists, and human rights defenders since their government takeover. After the culling, expulsion, and execution of many former government and security forces personnel, the most vocal voices of dissent have been silenced, and oppression has reigned in the country. The Taliban knows all too well that this consolidation of power has come at the cost of many lives and opportunities, a situation which it will undoubtedly be seeking to downplay during the talks in Qatar. With the aid that once supported large swaths of the Afghan population cut off and the agricultural sector still adjusting to the sudden shift from opium, there is a desperate need for support from outside sources.

Pakistan's recent moves to force the movement of millions of war-time Afghan refugees back to the Taliban-controlled country has also contributed to the mounting pressure to come to the table for these latest talks. The return of this many migrants to a country that has changed so dramatically will bring increased political strain that will drive civil unrest and economic instability if not carefully handled. This development, combined with the recent female-led public demonstrations, has put the Taliban in an awkward position. Without aid, the authority of the current regime could be at risk. With it, the Taliban's social control will be limited. The questions are where aid will come from, and if it will be willing to accept the terms that could accompany any type of support.

The economic strain caused by a shift from a wartime economy to a peacetime one was a known challenge that the Taliban would have to work hard to overcome. However, after having barred 20% of the workforce from participation, uprooting the livelihood of much of the country's farmers, and the impending flood of people who will need social support to re-integrate into the reformed Afghan society, the Taliban has found itself between a rock and a hard place. These stress factors are likely the driving forces behind its participation in this latest round of talks in Qatar, which are unlikely to go anywhere if the regime remains unyielding on its present gender apartheid system. Any social change regarding women's rights in Afghanistan does not appear to be likely at this point, as Taliban spokesmen have stuck to their guns, only saying that women's rights would be protected based on Sharia Law. Despite their central role and importance in the discussion, the Taliban have also refrained from inviting women to join the Qatar talks.

The conclusion of these talks does not appear to have made an immediate difference in Afghanistan's – and, by extension, the Taliban's – standing among the nations of the world. As one UN envoy put it, the discussions were “a good starting point.” However, they may have marked the beginning of a very long dialogue that could well end with progress being made to improve equity in the country, but making this progress happen will require the discussion to span both the economic desires of the Taliban and the bleak civil rights situation created by its return to power back in 2021. The United States has held \$7 billion of Afghanistan's central bank's reserves frozen since the withdrawal of American troops and the subsequent fall of Kabul. This money has been a major piece of leverage during diplomatic discussions since the Taliban's takeover, and now it might once again come into play. Between outside pressures, the frozen assets, and the stimulus that UN aid would bring to the country, the opening of this dialogue is the best chance that the global community has had since the U.S. withdrawal to try and promote improvements in the quality of life for the average Afghan citizen.