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**The rise and consolidation of the Taliban insurgency in
the Afghan government**

Master's thesis

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Declaration

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In Prague on July 30, 2024,

Paula Gómez

References

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Abstract

This work seeks to understand the differences between the first and the second Taliban Emirate as has become the only authority in this current period. The analysis is based on Gérard Dussouy's (2010) theory of "Systemic Geopolitics", and to follow the methodology, the two periods will be divided into five different fields. Changes in the physical space such as the effects of climate change or the development of transport infrastructure, demographic trends, the diplomatic-strategic field in terms of the Taliban's relations with other actors, and its economic opportunities and grievances will be described in both periods as the tangible spaces. In the symbolic dimension, the ideology and culture of the population, specifically of the Taliban, will also be analyzed in order to recreate the complexity of the Afghan system. The aim is to identify changes in the local and international context as well as in the group itself in order to understand where it stands in its engagement with the international community. It will also describe the advantages and challenges the Taliban face in the Afghan context and what prevents them from being officially recognized as the legitimate government of the Afghan state.

Abstrakt

Tato práce se snaží pochopit rozdíly mezi prvním a druhým emirátem Tálíbanu, který se stal jedinou autoritou v tomto současném období. Analýza vychází z teorie "systémové geopolitiky" Gérarda Dussouye (2010) a pro dodržení metodologie budou obě období rozdělena do pěti různých oblastí. Jako hmatatelné oblasti budou v obou obdobích popsány změny ve fyzickém prostoru, jako jsou dopady klimatických změn nebo rozvoj dopravní infrastruktury, demografické trendy, diplomaticko-strategická oblast z hlediska vztahů Tálíbanu s ostatními aktéry a jeho ekonomické příležitosti a překážky. V symbolické dimenzi bude analyzována také ideologie a kultura obyvatelstva, konkrétně Tálíbanu, s cílem rekonstruovat komplexnost afghánského systému. Cílem je identifikovat změny v místním a mezinárodním kontextu i v samotné skupině, aby bylo možné pochopit, jak si stojí ve svém angažmá v mezinárodním společenství. Budou také popsány výhody a výzvy, kterým Tálíbán v afghánském kontextu čelí, a co mu brání v tom, aby byl oficiálně uznán jako legitimní vláda afghánského státu.

Keywords

Taliban, recognition, opportunities, challenges, international community

Klíčová slova

Taliban, uznání, příležitosti, výzvy, mezinárodní společenství

Title

The rise and consolidation of the Taliban insurgency in the Afghan government

Název práce

Vzestup a upevnění pozice Tálíbanu v afghánské vládě

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Introduction

At the crossroads of Central Asia and the Middle East, Afghanistan is one of the most complex countries to understand that we can find in the globe. Its classification is very fluid, depending on the context and its perception it can be found in maps as part of the South Asian region, Central Asia, and Middle East. Its position has always been strategically valuable, but also its main curse as the interests of different actors have shaped the history of the country until nowadays. This variable categorization of the country between regions attends to cultural similarities, historical ties, ethnicities, and political interaction, but its own administration has been the main factor that kept it away from belonging completely to one of them.

Afghanistan has also been considered a failed state in the eyes of the West due to the lack of a single power ruling the territory. However, examining the nature, geography, and history of governments of the country gives many ideas of how the society and the state expect to be administered over time. To understand the fragility of the management of the country, the conception of the state should leave the Western standard of a monolithic entity to be governed and examined from their own experience and history, which has been marked to some extent by its complex geography (Barfield 2012).

This study aims to give a more comprehensive picture of Afghanistan following the work of Gérard Dussouy. Through the analysis of the different spaces that the author proposes in “Systemic Geopolitics: A Global Interpretation Method of the World”, Afghanistan is going to be divided in fields and lately connected to comprehend the interaction of the different factors that define the situation of current state. For this purpose, two periods will be specifically considered, the nineties’ rise of the Taliban government until the US invasion and the re-conquest of Kabul on August 15th 2021 to nowadays. These timelines have been chosen as both have been periods where an intra-group brought “stability” after the occupation of an external actor. The use of the proposed maps by the author will bring five different stages of the Afghani territory that will merge in a final picture. These will be useful to understand the differences of each situation that the Taliban found in the country, facilitating two different Afghanistan to be compared. By refusing the use of a two-dimension map, the author aims to study the direct or indirect effects that suppose any modification in the units that compound the system to the rest of it (Dussouy 2010).

For this research, the Taliban has been chosen as the only intra-group strong enough to impose a government along the territory independent from international actors. The general context of the country will be studied in order to show prospective on its future consolidation as the official government of Afghanistan, what in this research is considered as the complete control of the territory and its integration in the international community and institutions as a legitimate authority. Through the proposed methodology, not only internal factors will be analyzed independently but also the diplomatic and international situation, what will help to answer the research questions.

Research questions and objectives

RQ1: Has the Taliban insurgency evolved compared to its first government to consolidate its rule and bring stability to Afghanistan?

RQ2: What prevents the Taliban government from being recognized by the international community? What are the different factors that could help or make it difficult to achieve it if we compare both periods?

Structure of the Thesis

In order to follow the chosen methodology of Dussouy's systemic geopolitics, the thesis will be divided into seven chapters. In the introduction to the thesis, a historical background of the state of Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban insurgency will be found. Right after the contextualization, the analysis of both periods, 1996 and 2021, will be divided in the five categories proposed by the author: physical space, demographic space, diplomatic-strategic field, economic field and symbolic field. After the description of these sections, a sixth chapter will merge them to present the full image of each term to later be analyzed in order to be compared in the last chapter, giving an answer to the research questions..

Historical background of the state of Afghanistan

The history of Afghanistan's territory at the pivot of Eurasia as Halford J. Mackinder sustains in his Heartland Theory, has made it a victim of historic invasions. Falling into the hands of conquerors such as Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan and forming part of great empires that later collapsed gave Afghanistan the unofficial title of “graveyard of empires”. The country's heterogeneity is therefore remarkable for the different ethnic groups that make up the country and their attachment to the territory they inhabit, as they found themselves inside the borders of the state of Afghanistan that were established in 1893 under Amir Abdur Rahman Khan's rule.

This delimitation has not been exempted from controversy, mainly due to the establishment of the Durand Line, which divided the Pashtun tribes between the Afghan state and British India in order to protect the British Raj from Russian Tsarist expansion to the south in the context of the so-called Great Game. This agreement between Abdur Rahman Khan from the Barakzai dynasty and the Europeans have marked the relations with the later state of Pakistan, due to the strong presence of Pashtuns in their common border.

Abdur Rahman Khan was the first ruler to subjugate all the country using military force, portraying the necessity of a strong leader in command to ensure the independence of the Afghan nation as well as their Islamic religious identity, which is the common ground of the great majority of its population. Through the funding of its army by the British crown to preserve Afghanistan as a buffer zone to avoid direct confrontation with the Russian empire, the subsequent rulers kept the state-building process initiated by the Barakzai leader. This allowed the governments to avoid direct control of the state by foreign powers while preventing rebellions and maintaining order until the communist coup of 1978, which initiated the period of constant conflict that nowadays characterizes Afghanistan (Barfield 2012).

It is important to identify the key elements that gave legitimacy to the governments that maintained this long-term internal stability to study the latest attempts at organizing the country. First of all, the rulers focused on the central concept of Islam as the main cohesive factor within its society. After accepting this common ground, its army and peoples would support the independence of the Muslim State, to keep away Iranian influence as well as the

Soviet and British empires from their territory. Secondly, the interference of the state in local factions as clans or tribes' affairs was limited to a mediation role. Brokering peace agreements to solve disputes between groups, and without attempting to impose a central government to control them directly helped the rulers to avoid local opposition insurgencies. Lastly, the government was the official mean to receive and direct international funds and external help, as well as a channel to provide basic services like education networks or construction of communication lines as roads.

To wrap it up, when the state has been the calmest it has been through the government of a distant and benevolent state that could be able to favor the balance of power and the influence between the divisions of the population. The identification of Afghan society has been based on a common political culture where loyalty relies on the local groups as the tribes or clans instead of a central government. For this reason, when the status of the state was respected and not challenged while the government refused to disrupt the local factions' order (Roy 2004).

The moment that planted the seed of the lately chaotic scenario can be traced to Mohammad Daoud Khan, cousin of the last King Mohammad Zahir Shah and Prime Minister that in 1973 held a coup against him. By the abolition of the monarchy that had been present in one way or another since 1747, the new republic didn't win the sympathy and respect that the previous regime earned. The firm ties of Daoud's government with the Soviet Union provoked the reaction of Islamist anti-government uprisings; however, neither the relations with Moscow were at their best moment as the tension and disagreements increased exponentially. The president of the republic even started a campaign against Afghan communists, which led to the death of the leader of the Afghan Communist Party (ACP) and encouraged the Soviet sympathizers to topple his regime in 1978. After the death of Daoud, Nur Mohammed Taraki assumed the presidency as was the head of the ACP, but the chaos left by Daoud didn't permit him to stabilize the state even though was receiving direct military and economic support from the Soviet Union..

Taraki was murdered one year and a half later, and by the end of 1979, the Soviet troops entered Afghanistan to install and stabilize a new government while a war between local rebels and foreign troops erupted. Despite the initial victories around Kabul, the Afghan Jihad fought by the Mujahedeen showed their guerrilla capabilities and their organizational

skills based on their local affiliations as tribes or families. A factor that proved to be essential in their resistance and endurance was the great knowledge of the terrain they were fighting on compared to the military means and planning of the Russians.

In 1989 Mikhail Gorbachev ordered the withdrawal of the troops, leaving a communist government in Kabul under the presidency of Mohammad Najibullah that wouldn't last more than half a year on its own. The international support for the Afghan Jihad against the communist government united the efforts of Western countries such as the US, Israel, and the UK to regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran and even China, counting also with the sympathy of Muslims from around the world that joined what turned to be a global-Jihadi phenomenon..

The Mujahedeen objective was to establish a legitimate free and independent Islamic State with no chance to negotiate with the “infidel government” of Najibullah. Unexpectedly the government was not overthrown by the Islamists as easily as could be thought, it continued to fight by exploiting tribal and ethnic grievances and receiving Soviet backing; it was the disintegration of the USSR and the end of its support what collapsed the communist government. In 1992 the communists were ousted from power, leading to a Mujahedeen coalition to set an interim government; however, it was far from being a process to establish a permanent one due to the rise of internal conflict. The Mujahedeen Jihad flaws in achieving its final goal, have been identified as the difficulties in changing from insurgency to conventional war as well as their tribal divisions. The movement and its methods were not welcomed by the modernized urban centers nor by the tribal-ethnic feuds that wanted to enjoy their autonomy, which made them fight now for their individual needs (Williams 2014).

When fighting communism came to an end, it also did the Afghan Jihad; with the end of the ideology that had brought them together to fight, the Mujahedeen entered an internal war due to the revival of their previous tribal differences and interpretations of Islam. This led Afghanistan to become an unsustainable country controlled by militias and warlords involved in a civil war for power as they could not agree on how to govern the country. The fighting between Islamists and traditionalists left thousands of lives behind as well as the destruction of the poor infrastructure and political organization that remained after the previous period of war. As a result of this new chaotic environment, anarchy and terror

became the daily basis of the rural areas, creating the scenario for the appearance of the Taliban.

Emergence of the Taliban

With all the previously stated, it is set the context in which the Taliban emerged during the nineties: a communist government puppet of the USSR, the Soviet invasion, the Afghan Jihad aiming to establish a califate against the “infidel” socialist government and its reforms, to finally end in a civil war under a brutal anarchic system. While the multiethnic mujahedeen government was occupied with intrafighting, a huge red of madrassas were being funded by Saudi Arabia in Pakistan to spread Wahhabism in the region; however, they were not the only actors involved, Pakistan’s Jamiat-i-Ulema Islami party did the same to spread the Deobandi indigenous interpretation of Islam. It had a major impact on the Afghan refugees who fled the country looking for shelter inside the Pakistani border during the Soviet and Mujahedeen periods. It was in the core of these schools that the Taliban were formed, specifically in the North-West Frontier Province, taking advantage of the kinship networks to spread its cause (Johnson and Mason 2007).

The Taliban appeared in the Afghan territory in 1994 starting recruiting members at the madrassas of the provinces of Ghazni and Kandahar, promising during the spread of the movement to put an end to the Mujahedeen war and installing an Islamic government. They especially used the Islamic fundamentalist moral as well as the grievances and identity of the Pashtun to win the hearts and minds of the people as they share the ethnic factor with most of the population.

With the help of the Intelligence Services of Pakistan and the desperation the Afghani population to put an end to the terror of the Mujahedeen interim government in hands of Burhanuddin Rabbani, the Taliban captured Kabul in September 1996. The political leader and most of the government members, among them the Minister of Defense Ahmad Shah Masoud, were forced to flee, finding shelter in Mazar-I-Sharif where they formed the Northern Alliance. This new coalition, also known as the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan was compound mainly by Tajiks and united with the Uzbek and Hazara as an opposition group against the new rulers. The Taliban installed the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, representing an era of the rise to power of the Mullahs, with Mullah

Omar as the spiritual leader, who would be the only decision-maker of the Taliban, ignoring the Pashtun traditions of consensus.

They started targeting the warlords accused of the major destruction and chaos as they pledged; however, the promises of the Islamist group rapidly turned out to be far from reality. Their own extreme interpretation of the Sharia and its implementation under the institutionalization of a religious police force took down the optimism about the respect of any other Islamic practices and traditions.

By 1998 the students of Islam took Mazar-I-Sharif almost making the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan's positions in its territory disappear. Nevertheless, even though the Tajik Northern Alliance was about to cease to exist, it kept being the official representation at the UN; while only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and UAE recognized the Taliban, they were about to conquer the whole country as they managed to control around 80% of the territory.

It is important to notice the fundamental principles of Deobandi Islam to understand the first fall of the Taliban rule in 2001. They only show loyalty to religion and not to any other type of social organization, which is what they preached as claiming to be over tribal and ethnic divisions. Nevertheless, this went against what the Afghans expected, as the tribal tradition of Afghanistan was refused by the Taliban to impose their extreme interpretation of the Sharia. The imposition of this branch of Islam, despite being religion the common factor used by previous leaders to unify the population, maintained the disruption of the nature of the Afghan social system as the communist ideology did years before.

However, the main burden of the Taliban rule resulted in the obligation to keep the Jihad to protect Muslims around the world, which led Mullah Omar to sympathize with Osama Bin Laden and his global Jihad. Due to this favorable relation, Afghanistan became a safe haven for al-Qaeda, a base where recruit and plan their attacks in other countries, until the turning point that supposed 9/11, when the US declared the war on terror and intervened in the country with the objective of wiping out al-Qaeda as well as the regime that served them as a base.

Taliban recomposition during United States presence to the retake of Kabul: from 2001 to 2021

American President George W. Bush's decision to intervene in Afghanistan by supporting the Northern Alliance soon proved to be effective in wiping out al-Qaeda's base to prevent the attacks on Western countries; however, the US and its allies did not withdraw but stayed to promote the creation of a democratic system that could have the support of the Afghan population. New government institutions, a judicial system, a constitution, and a parliament were installed in order to carry out the country's reconstruction effort.

The fact that the main focus of the new rulers was the big cities of Mazar-I-Sharif, Kabul, Jalalabad, Qandahar and Herat, led to the far and remote provinces' isolation. These small and disconnected villages suffered then of the inadequacy to access basic needs which created a gap between the different territories and fomented the mistrust of the people in the new governmental institutions (Sakhi 2022).

It should be added to the government's weakness that the Taliban never completely disappeared from the Afghan landscape, who helped themselves by using their loose and decentralized connections to extend their influence and recompose the group. With orders from Peshawar and Quetta, leadership bases in Pakistan, the Taliban were able to coordinate their action and by 2003 they targeted the North and Eastern regions of the country. They managed to increase their support and connections by using social grievances and political issues while installing informal governmental systems in order to weaken the popular backing of Kabul's government (Sakhi 2022).

When the security in Afghanistan appeared to have improved, in 2009 the Taliban violence reemerged in a wave of suicidal and violent attacks. The targeting of Afghanistan's streets proved the definitive inefficacy of the government to provide protection to its own population. In their fight against the Kabul authority the Taliban used two strategies that took them to reconquer the country: an open war against the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), the US troops and the NATO allies; and guerrilla techniques to exhaust the government efforts in the rural areas while recruiting their population as they apparently addressed in a better way their grievances (Sakhi 2022).

Apart from the Taliban struggle, in the collapse of the US-supported government, four major problems related to both authorities were identified. First of all, the Taliban threat and organization were underestimated as by early in the century were capable of spreading their influence; related to this, Kabul was unable to protect its population along the country, from security threats as the insurgent group as well as by the provision of basic life services. Another issue was found in the internal structure, as corruption was never addressed, helping kleptocracy and leading to the increasing pressure between factions, which raised also ethnic tensions and divided the country. At the same time, the Kabul regime's main burden was the extreme dependency on foreign funds, which reckless reliability didn't make them emphasize in solving the territorial disclaimers to promote local sources of revenues that could sustain the institutions if international aid would recede; this brought the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to their final mistake: the belief that the US interests on the country would persist and with it their support (Sakhi 2022).

However, one of the main burdens of the twenty years of war can be attributed to the negotiations held by the US, which in the beginning excluded the Taliban from the institutions and turned them into a main player during the final talks. The capture and killing of Ossama Bin Laden on the second of May 2011, the primary mission of Bush's administration to enter Afghanistan, put on the US agenda the pressure to find a way out of the country, leading to the opening of a Taliban office by 2013 in Doha, Qatar. Through the creation of this institution Washington recognized indirectly the strength of the insurgents and the need to negotiate with them. The awareness of the Taliban of this fact gave them the confidence and firmness to refuse to engage in talks with the government of Kabul as they maintained the unrecognition of Ashraf Ghani's government authority and with it avoided any official conversation (Malikzada and Filseth 2023).

The United States negotiated parallelly with both groups, however, they never actually talked between them, hindering the promised Afghan intra-negotiation and easing the way for the Taliban takeover. In 2020, under Trump's administration, the United States and the Taliban signed an agreement to bring peace to Afghanistan, the group promised the reduction of violence as part of the agenda of the intra-Afghan peace talks, while the USA, as well as foreign forces, would completely withdraw from the country committed to a timeline. The same document would state the guarantee of the insurgents to prevent the planning of any

attack in their territory against Washington and its allies, the key task for the Taliban to not be confronted by international forces (US Government 2020).

The signature of the deal started the reduction of military support to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, losing key positions as foreign advisors or air operations in a critical moment: Taliban's expanding operations. Also needed to be mentioned is the compromise of Washington to release 5.000 Taliban fighters from prison, (among them senior commanders) who after being released would join again the Taliban front. As the insurgent group knew the bases and deadlines of the agreement, and they never were punished for their military operations since the signature as they were not carried out against the US troops, they kept their activity until they took the capital.

Trump's administration, in command of the withdrawal negotiations, did not let any further plan for its predecessor to hold the final retirement, only the key dates to put an end to the longest war in the history of the United States, "By June 2020, President Trump reduced U.S. troops in Afghanistan to 8,600. In September 2020, he directed a further draw down to 4,500. A month later, President Trump tweeted, to the surprise of military advisors, that the remaining U.S. troops in Afghanistan should be "home by Christmas!" on September 28, 2021" (White House 2023). When Joe Biden took office in January 2021, there were only 2.500 American troops, and the Taliban were at their strongest moment, controlling almost half the country. The capabilities of the Taliban opposed to the weakness of the ANDSF were proved even before the moment of the troops' exit, as its expectations to withstand the pressure of the group at least until the end of the year were proved wrong.

The acceleration of the withdrawal pace in May 2021 was followed by the Taliban's offensive on the urban areas controlled until then by the republic, taking border crossing and capturing key cities such as Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-I-Sharif and Jalalabad. Two weeks before the official Western retirement the insurgents entered Kabul, making Ashraf Ghani flee the country and consequently collapsing the government of the Afghan Republic and its institutions on August 15th.

The chaos started already that day and stayed until the day of the complete withdrawal, even forcing the deployment of 5.000 troops to help with the evacuation of US workers and their allies, including thousands of Afghans that had relations with Washington. Five days before the Pentagon confirmed the end of the troops' evacuation, two suicide attacks claimed by

the ISKP¹ at the surroundings of the airport of Kabul marked the deadliest day of the US Army on the ground since 2011, with 13 troops downed and a total of 169 local civilians killed (Center of Preventive Action 2024).

After more than 2,3 trillion dollars expended on the ground, the US left the country in the hands of the same people that they took out in 2001. The proclamation of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is celebrated as a public holiday each 15th of August, commemorating the turn to power of the Taliban at the expense of the United States' withdrawal.

Introduction to Dussouy's methodology applied to the case of Afghanistan

As Gérard Dussouy proposes to study the world's system complexity by breaking it into five fields of action, in this study, Afghanistan is going to be analyzed in the same way. Mainly, the purpose of this division is to comprehend the interaction between the dimensions and identify the differences that the changes in each one's elements act on the rest to a greater or lesser extent. It is important to notice that the study of Dussouy is based on the world system, and for that reason, some changes need to be made in order to adapt properly to the specific case of Afghanistan.

The first space to be studied is the physical one, as the author defines it, the one where the different elements are present as well as the multiple logics (economy, demography, culture and politics) take place. This one is the most static field, referring to the "availability of natural resources and the topographical and proxemic structure which is obvious (...) perturbations in the natural environment brought about by technical progress and pollution" (Dussouy 2010). For this reason, static natural features such as landscape distribution and the evolution of the environment and terrain by human action will be considered in this field.

¹ Islamic State Khorasan Province, formed in 2014 by dissidents of Afghan and Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda in the Khorasan region, which expands through Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. They have been the most active terrorist group and with an even more strict version of the Sharia than the Taliban themselves (Eggink 2024).

The technical progress of this space will be described as the evolution of transport infrastructure of the terrain, such as roads and railways of Afghanistan. This man-made transformation is directly related to the economic field due to the need for resources to develop them, however, I consider it as an essential part of the physical space due to the connectivity difficulties and role that plays the Afghan landscape itself. For this reason, in the later economic field these projects will be mentioned but not further specified.

In second place can be found the demographic features of the system, where Afghanistan's inhabitants' trends will be described, such as migration flows, population growth trends and characteristics as well as its regulation. At the same time, the author makes reference to "the economic but also political consequences (...) which have hitherto not been thoroughly evaluated" (Dussouy 2010). In this case, Dussouy talks about the ageing population in Europe; however, in Afghanistan, the challenge is completely the opposite: a younger population trend.

The third dimension concerns the diplomatic-strategic field, where one main power with a dominant logic attempts to reduce the system's fragmentation; in Afghanistan's context Taliban domination over its population fragmentation. In our case, it will be also analyzed the interaction of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan with the rest of the international community in terms of recognition, cooperation and diplomacy. As well, it will also be considered as it refers on the description of this field "the decline of the state compared to the ever-increasing role of other participants is the most commonly suggested alternative" (Dussouy 2010). While he involves here increasing role of other entities in world politics in opposition to the State, in our case of Afghanistan it will be taken care of as the distinct groups that can be found in Afghanistan and can be a threat to the Islamic Emirate.

The fourth space concerns the economic sphere, but as Afghanistan can be found in an isolated position while in other periods was relying on international funds, this field will treat its integration to international markets and projects. As well, the opportunities and challenges of Afghanistan's economic situation will be addressed.

The last field to discuss, the symbolic one, involves the cultural and ideologic study. This space is key as the interaction of the Taliban's precepts on the rest of the fields has become their main challenge. As they have implemented every official decision based on their extreme interpretation of religious and traditional values, many problems have not been

addressed properly. It even took them out of office during their first period after hosting Oussama Bin Laden, which provoked the reaction of the US.

As the author states in his work, this field “incorporates culture shock as a phenomenon of diffusion and mimicry. It takes into account the religious revival and the awakening of identities as much as it does the harmonisation of ways of thinking” (Dussouy 2010). According to this, the cultural values of the Taliban will be described along the general cultural and ethnic background of Afghanistan in order to understand the relationship between the group and the population in this matter.

As will be noticed, the interaction between each field is inevitable with the changes in the different elements that define them. The interplay of the components through the dimensions allows us to understand the complex general situation, their opportunities and the challenges facing in this case the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

1. Physical space

Afghanistan's relief and geography have remained static in the periods chosen in this analysis, as well as throughout the process of the state formation itself. During the early stages the mountain range, valleys and rivers have conditioned the development of the peoples inhabiting the Afghan territory, as difficulted the communication between communities and the central government, determining the intrastate relations as have been described above. While the natural features of its lands have not changed, its use has evolved over the years, creating an impact on its value, not only in the local sphere but also in the international community. These features will continue to be reflected somehow throughout the analysis of the different scenarios; and even in this field, the rest will play a role in its development.

The Hindu Kush Mountains, found in the middle of Afghanistan, occupy 70% of its territory, dividing it by geographic features: Northern Plains, Central Highlands and Southwestern Plateau. The plains in the North are the most fertile Afghan lands, where the Amu Darya River flows, with an elevation of 600 meters above the sea occupying only around 15% of the country. In contrast to this area, on the South of the Hindu Kush, the region is a compound of deserts and high plateaus with an average of 900 meters, finding only fertile soil along rivers like the Helmand on the West. These territories are divided by the highlands, one of the most impenetrable regions of the world extending from the Northeast to the Southwest, with an average elevation of 2700 meters. (Palka 2001)

In terms of geographical location, Afghanistan lacks access to the sea, however, its landlocked position situates the country at the intersection of South and Central Asia. Afghanistan shares its longest border with Pakistan in the Southeast, it limits on the North with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and to the West with the Islamic Republic of Iran. It can also be found in the Northeast the Wakhan Corridor, also connecting the country to the Xinjiang province of China, giving Kabul plenty of opportunities to exploit its geographical location.

1.1. First Taliban Period (1996-2001)

When the Taliban conquered Kabul in 1996, they found a country devastated by the consecutive wars that had ravaged the territory. Since the Soviet-Afghan war that began in

1979 and the subsequent civil war of the Mujahedeen factions, almost twenty years of power struggle had a role in shaping the Afghani landscape.

As stated before, in general, the Afghan terrain is characterized by its inhospitable conditions and just a few suitable to hold natural life in some parts of the country. This situation was exacerbated by the war effort, rising the environmental problems due to the destruction of forests, and water pollution as well as the placement of more than 10 million land mines, which is the main threat to Afghan life. Due to the lack of resources to access modern irrigation technology, Afghan people in drier areas had been forced to abandon farmlands due to the effect of war. Desertification and chemical contamination had damaged the main agricultural lands, leading to the use of only half of the capacity of the arable terrain. The effect of these droughts was so significant on the food crop that during the year 2000 its production was not even able to meet the needs of the Afghan population. (Palka 2001)

The damage to agriculture, which serves as the major sector of the economy, had been also affected by the lack of transportation infrastructure, meaning roads, railways and navigable rivers, which kept the production on the local and regional territories. Afghanistan counted 21000km of roadways, and only 2793km of those were paved and capable of holding some wheel vehicles. In terms of railroad, tracks could be found only at the cross-border points of Towraghondi and Kheyraabad connecting the country with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, with a total of 24,6km of infrastructure. With ten paved-runways airports, only three had the capability of accommodating military and commercial aircraft, which suffered the sanctions of the UN preventing the development of legitimate trade and as a consequence this type of facility. By 2001 it was stated that around 90% of the Afghan transport system was in poor condition and insufficiently connected due to the effect of continuous war (Asian Development Bank 2011)

Even though Afghanistan is rich in natural resources, instability and poor conditions have made impossible its exploitation, in fact, the crude oil reserves have not been exploited successfully to join international markets. Natural gas exportation was the main industrial activity during the seventies; however, as the principal importer of Afghan gas was the USSR, during the nineties its production was almost zero, focusing on local consumption. The estimation of petroleum in 2001 was estimated at 95 million barrels, while the gas could reach 5 trillion cubic feet. Afghanistan's northern region was also believed to hold around

73 million tons of coal, which added to the two firsts gives the country a good base of natural resources. Moreover, hydroelectric power was also generated by three operational dams, Breshna-Kot, Mahipar and Kajaki, yet not enough to not have to rely on energy importation from Turkmenistan. (Palka 2001)

1.2. Second Taliban Period (2021-Present)

The period before the second Taliban government was characterized by the US-led attempt to modernize the country. Over twenty years of invasion, Afghanistan received numerous projects and investments, however, the Taliban's struggle for power hindered the realization of most of them. As well, the recapture of Kabul by the Taliban suspended the aid received by the country from the Afghanistan Reconstructive Trust Fund (ARTF) and the International Development Association (IDA), disrupting the development of Afghanistan's infrastructure. (H. Khan, *The Diplomat*, *Catalyzing Renewable Energy: Path to Afghanistan's Economic Revival* 2024)

The Ring Road² system was never completed due to the continuous war, specifically through the course of thirty years of conflict against the Mujahedeen and the Taliban. However, since the beginning of the century, financial support from the international community to the government of Hamid Karzai improved transportation in Afghanistan. "According to SIGAR report (SIGAR-17-11-AR) USAID and DOD spent around (2,8\$ billion) to rebuild Afghanistan road network. New Highways, state roads, railways, airports were built by the support of international donors (USAID, DOD), World Bank, Asian Development Bank" (Haqmal, Kaur y Nasir Humaib 2019). According to the same report, in 2002, in Afghanistan were built 42150 km of road, while 29800 of them remained unpaved. The document also highlights the construction of around 21 passes and tunnels connecting the country, some of which are still under work.

Nevertheless, the road state is still in poor condition, finding most of them paved more than 30 years ago and some of the new ones constructed with low-quality materials. In addition to the intrinsic bad state of roads, the studies show the threats of the current and previous

² National road of Afghanistan built during the sultanate of Zahir Shah connecting sixteen provinces in a circle of approximately 2300Km. It is an essential infrastructure as it links the major Afghan cities: Kabul, Kandahar, Herat and Mazar-I-Sharif (Haqmal, Kaur y Nasir Humaib 2019)

context that have increased the deterioration of transport infrastructure. Between these hazards can be found the Taliban and terrorist groups' action, placing bombs along communication lines, the increase of traffic and the overload of the pavement. As well, the lack of funding and information has increased the failure rate, as the damage to the roads is fast due to the poor maintenance and implementation of unsuitable designs (Naimi and Karimi 2019).

One of the infrastructures that received 250 million dollars from the World Bank in 2015 is the Salang Pass Road. This road is essential to connect the country from North to South through the Hindu Kush Mountain range, facilitating the connectivity and trade of Kabul with the Central Asian countries. This Trans-Hindukush Road Connectivity Project was supposed to be implemented for seven years under the Ministry of Public Works (MPW) (TOLONews 2015); however, weather conditions and funding have been a handicap to achieve its total reparation, finding still an extremely deteriorated route while the government already wants to open a second road on the same pass as is aware of its need (TOLONews 2024).

Climate change has also played an essential role in hindering the already harsh nature of the country, and concerning this global problem, Afghanistan finds itself among the most vulnerable due to its geographical location and relief. It has been found that the average temperature of the country has increased by 1.8°C since 1950, significantly more than the global average; even some parts of the territory double the records. Rising temperatures are threatening the vital basic resources of Afghan peoples such as water supplies due to the evaporation process, which is expected to further threaten the already at risk food production. Increasing droughts are worsening food security as many farmers are not able to crop their lands, causing food shortages and affecting the livestock (Safi, et al. 2024).

But is not only rising temperatures that pose an imminent risk to Afghanistan, heavy rainfall has increased by 25% in thirty years, causing severe floods at the same time as droughts and heatwaves across the country. The latest disaster occurred in May 2024, the Northeastern region of Afghanistan suffered floods due to torrential rains, affecting more than 60.000 people, displacing 5.000 families and damaging essential infrastructure such as bridges, roads, health facilities, agricultural land and schools (OCHA 2024). According to the Risk Index 2023, Afghanistan ranks fourth among the countries most at risk of a crisis and eighth

in the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index, among the least adapted or prepared to face climate change effects (OCHA 2023).

It has been stated by government officials the necessity of investment on projects to fight climate change as almost twenty-one million Afghans (almost half of the population) do not have access to drinkable water due to its effects (Samadi 2024). To face the droughts in the country, the Ministry of Energy and Water has announced the government's plan to construct almost 100 check dams and small dams. those flash floods would also prevent the inundation of croplands, and as well it would help generate employment and bring relief to farming families (Samadi, Nearly 100 Dams are Planned for Construction: MoEW 2024). However, the actual construction of quality infrastructure can face a lack of international investment due to international sanctions on the government, hindering the development of these essential projects for the efficient usage of Afghan territory.

In terms of natural resources, by 2011 the value of Afghanistan deposits was estimated at \$1,13 trillion, of those \$222 billion in natural gas and oil while \$908 billion was in minerals such as copper or iron. Nevertheless, instability keeps the true value of Afghan natural capability, which is thought to be worth up to three trillion dollars (Lipow and Melese 2011). The lack of infrastructure and the destruction of the existent one due to the violence that characterizes Afghan recent history does not yet allow the efficient exploitation of the reserves, which include lithium (deposits thought to be among the largest of the world), gold, chromite, copper, iron, coal and high-quality rare metals as well as other precious minerals (Shinwari, et al. 2023).

Although Afghanistan possesses oil and gas, this inefficient exploitation keeps Kabul dependent on energy importation, mainly from Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Iran. And not only are non-renewable energy resources untapped but also the country's potential for renewable energy production is starting to be discovered in practice as many investors are showing interest in this sector. With an efficient usage of these opportunities, Afghanistan could not only meet the domestic energy demand but also become an exporter to other Asian countries.

2. Demographic Space

The Afghan population has been subjected to more than thirty years of conflict, which has impacted the development of its demography. There have been times of hope during periods of relative stability, however, the humanitarian crises affecting the country have persisted.

In general terms, the population tends to concentrate around accessible sources of water, finding most of the villages and cities located in relatively flat lands or close to rivers to hold agricultural activities. These natural conditions explained by the physical space take us to realize the position of the major cities. Kabul, the capital and largest city, finds itself in a flat valley near the Kabul River, which starts in the Hindu Kush and flows to Pakistan. Second on the list is Kandahar, the southernmost commercial center of Afghanistan, also on a plain close to the Tarnak river. Herat as the third in the ranking is the economic center in the western part of the country, finding itself in high-quality fertile lands being the most populated agricultural region. Regarding the distribution of smaller towns, these are often separated from each other by up to 100 km, established in flatter locations that offer suitable living conditions avoiding rough terrain (Palka 2001).

The distribution of the different ethnicities is also affected by the geographic features of Afghanistan, finding the Pashtun as the largest group, around 40% of the population mostly in the south and east of the country; the Tajiks in the north as the second biggest ethnicity, supposing around a 25% of the total population; Uzbeks can also be found in the northern-central border of Afghanistan and the Hazara in the central mountains supposing each group about the 10% each. To be added to the list of ethnicities should be considered the Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Baluchi, Nuristani, Aimaq, Qizilbash, and Brahui minorities that reflect the wealth of Afghan society.

Demography presents a challenge in Afghanistan, not only because of the growth of the population itself but also because of the promptness in which it has occurred, severely affecting the age structure of the country. The weakness of the socio-economic development of the government is aggravated by these factors, as is more difficult to absorb force labor and provide basic services such as schooling or healthcare; conditions that can serve as a source of motivation to young desperate people to join radical movements (El-Badry and Swanson 2012).

2.1 First Taliban Period (1996-2001)

Since the soviet invasion, Afghanistan qualified as the largest producer of refugees in world terms³ (UNHCR 2024). This trend continued during the Taliban period due to the poor humanitarian conditions and their inability to overcome these problems through the development of infrastructure. As the government relations towards the international community were limited during the nineties period, and as well they didn't engage with the NGO's labor inside their territory, international funding was very limited. These conditions and isolation are thought to be the roots of Al-Qaeda and Taliban's rise and strengthening in the territory until the launch of "Operation Enduring Freedom" which would put an end to the first Taliban rule.

The Taliban started their mandate with 3.5 million refugees in neighboring countries, which also made the NGOs focus their work on their immediate borders. The continuation of the conflict and the lack of investment in Afghanistan to alleviate this exodus trend and help the population to return to the country, concentrated in Pakistan, as most of the humanitarian projects did not engage long-term objectives in Afghanistan. The main migrating push factors are environmental, political and economic, finding the first conquer of Afghanistan as a key reason for different ethnic minorities to abandon the Pashtun-controlled territory, where internal movements raised to 500.000 (Barakat and Strand 1995).

To the political risk was also added the lack of job opportunities as well as the environmental stress that affected mainly the rural population (a sector that compounded the 80% of the total population) (Barakat and Strand 1995). A big group among the rural population that needs to be considered into numbers is the nomads, consisting of two million of the total. Most of them are Pashtuns which move from winter valleys and plains in the west to the northeast of the Hindu Kush in summer (Palka 2001).

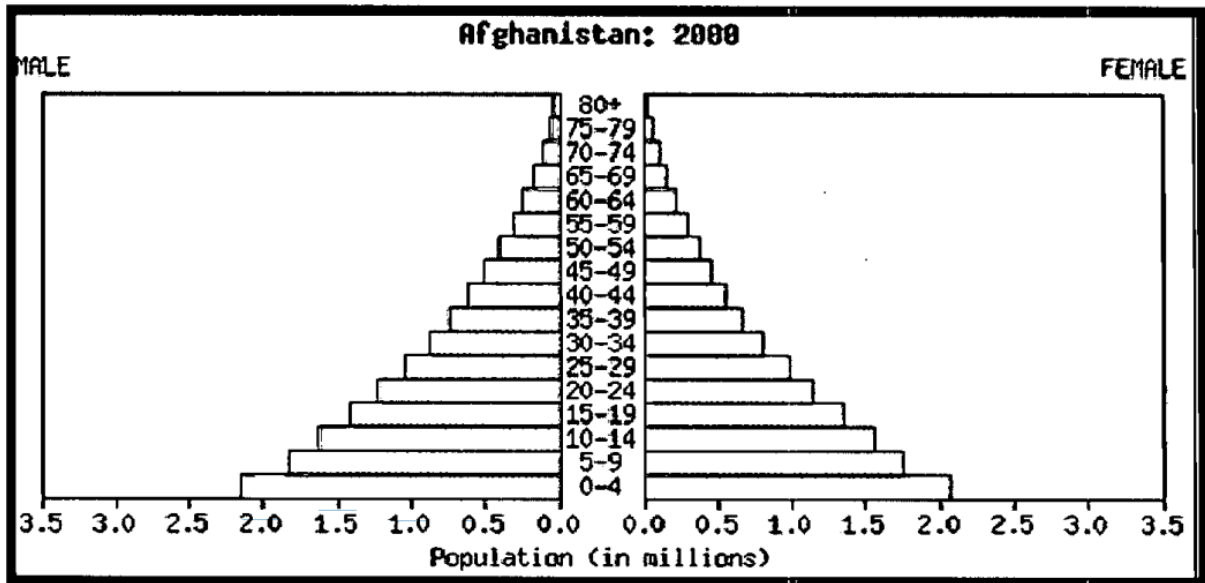
As to mortality rate, Afghanistan topped the ranking of the world's highest rate of infant mortality. In fact, the life expectancy of children born in the year 2000 was expected to reach the age of 46, due to the relation of adult mortality to the effect of children's diseases. These numbers were not only affected due to the illiteracy level that ravages the country but it can

³ Now in a tie with Syria due to the effects of the civil war that began with the Arab Uprising.

also be tracked to the capital, where the educational levels are higher and therefore the health facilities (Palka 2001).

However, the population growth has been notable since the early nineties, where in 1990 could be found at 10,5 million people living in the country while in the year 2000, the population would have more than doubled to 26 million according to the US Census Bureau (Palka 2001). Kabul concentrated around a million and a half people while Herat, the third largest city would not get to more than two hundred thousand (Palka 2001).

The population profile for the year 2000 represented in the age-sex pyramid shows a fast growth of the population as the bottom, representing the newborn children to 4-year-old is double than the people that are between 25 and 29. The dependency ratio during this period could be found at 44%, meaning for every 100 working-age people there are 44 that depend on them. This creates a problem in the country as the dependent population had grown too fast while the productivity and wealth of the state did not meet the criteria to maintain these new Afghans as there could be found many limitations on the healthcare system, nutrition and schooling; moreover, when the children reach the working age the country would face the lack of jobs for the new generation of young families to find their livelihood (Palka 2001).



1. AGE-SEX PYRAMID FOR AFGHANISTAN, 2000⁴

This trend could not be stopped due to the increasing number of women of childbearing age and the Taliban's negative to implement initiatives in order to halt it, as could have been the introduction of birth control methods. Due to the cultural norms that followed the radical group during the nineties, large family size was very valuable, and as well the role of women was very defined, both reasons to not promote employment and education opportunities outside the family core (Palka 2001).

Women and girls are the most affected extract of the population by the Taliban government. The radical interpretation of their tribal cultural traditions and religious features even brought the situation to the point of being considered a gender apartheid due to the lack of recognition of basic rights. In terms of education, only 900.000 males were enrolled in institutions by 2001, and no girl had legal access under the Taliban government, "Afghan women are portrayed as weak, passive, silent, and oppressed subjects in war propaganda. Afghan patriarchy, patrilineality and patrilocality maintain subjugation and subordination of women and male control over their labor power, reproduction, sexuality, mobility and household economic resources" (Wani 2024).

⁴ Source: US Census Bureau, International Data Base 2001 <https://www.census.gov/population/international/>
Palka, Eugene J. 2001, Afghanistan a Regional Geography. Page 87.

2.2. Second Taliban Period (2021-Present)

The moment the Taliban took many territories and the conquest of Kabul was later inevitable, the Afghans started moving towards safer locations. In the last months of 2020, there were registers of 2,9 million Afghans internally displaced already, a number that increased to 3,5 million by July 2021. Most of them fled to the capital augmenting the pressure on basic needs as shelter, food or health items.

In terms of international displacements, the UNCHR had 2,5 million Afghans registered around the world by the end of 2020, a number thought to be much higher. The main host countries of these figures are Pakistan with 1,4 million and Iran with 780.000; nevertheless, it is considered that around 2,6 million undocumented were living in the country of the Ayatollahs by May 2021 (Loft 2021).

The UNHCR report of 2023 states that the number of asylum-seekers and people in a similar refugee situation was already 5,8 million, doubling the figures since the arrival of the Taliban to the government in August 2021; while the internal displacements decreased from 3,3 million in 2022 to 3,2 in 2023, accompanying the raising trend of fleeing from the country due to the humanitarian crisis, political risk and lack of opportunities that face the country. To date, 90% of refugees can be found between Pakistan and Iran's Islamic Republics (UNHCR 2023).

Concerning the youngest Afghans, life expectancy at birth increased in comparison to the nineties period. By 2022 it was situated at 63 by the World Bank, following the rising trend of the last thirty years⁵ (World Bank Group 2022). As to infant mortality, still is a leader in the world ranking by far⁶ with the death of 103,06 children younger than one year per a thousand live births (O'Neill 2024). In 2024 the fertility rate estimates an average of 6,6 children per woman in the whole territory, finding even higher numbers in some territories as Kandahar, which has an overall of 7,7 children. This creates a problem in women's development and lives due to their forced dedication to take care of the youngest of the

⁵ The highest point these figures reached was 64 in 2019, which fell back to 62 in 2021 coinciding with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, a trend that has since reversed.

⁶ The next country in the ranking according to Statista is Somalia with 85,06 child deaths per thousand live births.

family, not permitting them to join the labor market or forming themselves, what favors the adherence to Taliban rules and their implementation, and also put in risk their own health due to their reduced means and possibilities (El-Badry and Swanson 2012).

Education, despite the improvement in numbers since 2001, reaching up to 9,5 million students with 39% of females among them, has worsened and reinforced the huge social problem of the country due to the backlash that supposed the Kabul conquest by the Taliban (Wani 2024). Nowadays, only 20,6% of women in Afghanistan are literate due to the measures installed by the government (UNESCO 2024). This negative data will increase exponentially if the growing population trend continues while the Taliban order prohibiting women and girls' education after the age of 12 persists⁷. Under this ban, more than a million girls joined the five million who already were out of school due to the lack of facilities.

Moreover, despite the special attention needed to the situation of the female population, is also important to bring to the topic the worsening quality of education. The alteration of content by the Taliban's Education Ministry to adapt to the strict principles of the government, in addition to the loss of skilled personnel as those who fled the country and women remaining in the territory who were teachers and cannot work anymore, have deteriorated the formation of the boys that can access to the institutions.

Two-thirds of the population in 2023 needed urgent humanitarian assistance, 28,3 million people in total out of the forty-two million Afghans in the territory. The growing population trend has continued increasing around a million each year, from 40 million in 2021 with the beginning of the government to 43,3 by mid-2024 (Worldometers 2024). As in the first period, with no evolution of their traditional principles, there will not be approved any measure that could halt the increasing numbers and so will not relieve the pressure on the population to access basic needs.

The sex-age pyramid has evolved in the same way increasing the numbers of each extract exponentially along with the total population growth, and the dependency ratio is even higher, as per every 100 working-age people can be found 97 depending on them (El-Badry and Swanson 2012).

⁷ A temporary decision that turned two years this 2024 with no expectancies of being reversed.

3. Diplomatico-strategic field

The importance of Afghanistan in world politics might be sometimes underrated due to its intrinsic instability. Nevertheless, its position at the crossroads of Central Asia, the Indian Subcontinent and Iran makes this volatility a regional problem as it is known that its neighbors had to support factions in conflict to try to keep it away from its borders; as well, this internal struggle is taken as an advantage to influence the territory.

It is important to highlight in both cases the context in which Afghanistan was at the moment of the Taliban takeover of the country. The group's rise has followed in each time a period where foreign forces attempted to dominate the Afghan landscape and impose a system of government that does not fit the model to which the tribal population is historically adapted, as described in the introductory section.

Nevertheless, the way in which they started taking places along the Afghan territory spreading their influence is even more significant. In the first period, they presented themselves as the religious force to stabilize a country that was in the midst of a brutal civil war that arose after the defeat of the Soviet forces; in 2021 they came back as part of an agreement of withdrawal by the USA troops.

The emirate is not very tolerant of other ways of life than its own, which has led to an attempt to homogenize the country through force, marginalizing minority groups and punishing those who deviate from its norms based on their extreme interpretation of Pashtun tradition and Islam. The general aspects to highlight of both governments are the absence of female figures and minority representation, both share a similar structure and the same principles.

3.1 First Taliban Period (1996-2021)

As previously stated, the origins of the Taliban can be tracked to the Pakistan madrasas where millions of Pashtuns fled looking for shelter. Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam's⁸ followers joined Mullah Omar's critics towards the no application of the Sharia Law in Afghanistan

⁸ The Assembly of Islamic Clerics, founded in 1941, colonial India at the time, with the aim of transforming Pakistan into an Islamic state governed by Sharia law, is the closest Pakistani political party to the Taliban regime (DBpedia n.d.).

by the warlords, and with the support of Pakistan's intelligence services and Minister of Interior, they could control the country in less than two years. They were able to impose their theocratic government along all the areas under their control but the North, which kept challenging its rule under the Northern Alliance (Palka 2001).

The base of the Taliban's emirate was the Sharia Law with the Quran as a reference, what lacked political vision to rule a country, with no precepts to settle a suitable structure for the state and how to administer and adapt to the context in which Afghanistan was found. Under their expectative to become that ideal Islamic State that they were pursuing, they promulgated strict edicts, leading to brutal punishments for those that did not follow them, repression which characterized their first government. As their restrictions had no ambiguity of interpretation there was no space for local traditions, even between the different Muslim communities. Their attempt to follow strictly the model of the first umma of prophet Muhammad took them to impose norms on beards, music or which was the most controversial: women's access to education, job positions and their role in society (De Miguel 2023).

Taliban's policies towards their peoples impacted differently through the territories, as well as its support from the Afghan tribes and factions. For the Southern region, which enjoys a more traditional and conservative tradition Taliban's policies did not have a great impact comparable to the one that had for the Afghan capital and other territories from the center and the Northern region. For the population of Kabul, the extreme implementation of Sharia and Pashtun values, specifically the violation of women's rights and the change of their role in society as well as the exclusion of Hazaras, Tajiks and Uzbek minorities in the capital city supposed a radical change in the core of the country. Due to the harsh line followed by the government, the resentment among the population increased generally in all the Taliban-controlled territories. Even in the Southern region, which initially backed them, the population's resentment against the group grew, mainly due to the fact that they were constantly conscripting the male population to fight their endless battles, (De Miguel 2023).

The main opposition group the Taliban was the United Islamic Front for Salvation of Afghanistan, better known as the Northern Alliance, a government that was established in 1992 after defeating the Soviet government. It reemerged after the civil war to become an anti-Taliban military coalition of Mujahedeen militias. Following the Taliban's radical

interpretation of Islam, many Pashtuns were ousted from the institutions, and many of the remaining left joined also the anti-Taliban resistance due to the misrepresentation of their ethnicity by the Islamists (START 2014).

The leader of the Islamic Front was also the president of the Islamic Republic from 1992 to 1996, Burhanuddin Rabbani. The general of the group's military forces was the founder Ahmad Shah Massoud. Leading the Pashtun ethnicity in the Northern coalition could be found Abdul Haq and Haji Abdul Qadir; the Hazara Shiites, were fighting from the militia Hizb-i-Wahdat under the command of Karim Khalili and Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq; the Uzbeks of the Jombesh-e Melli Islami were directed by Abdul Rashid Dostum; and under the Jamiat-I-Islami⁹ the Tajiks of the founder Massoud (START 2014).

The Northern Alliance had to face the groups supporting the Taliban as well. Among them could be found al-Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan to return the favor to the Taliban as they were provided with a haven in Afghanistan. On the other hand, they had to oppose those governments supporting the insurgents, such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia (START 2014).

The hopeful phase of the emergence of the Taliban faded away when they started spreading their control along Afghanistan. The peaceful and stable country that they promised was compromised by their own brutal violence against the population in the form of severe punishments up to executions of those who did not follow their restrictive edicts or did not deviate from their previous values and traditions. The intolerance of the government which was becoming stronger each year became a major issue in the international community, what mainly determined their acceptance and inclusion in it (De Miguel 2023).

The recognition of the first Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was very limited, only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates accepted the Taliban as the legitimate government. Meanwhile in the international community Kabul's United Nations' seat was represented by the Mujahedeen resistance under the leadership of Burhanuddin Rabbani, the United States and most of the countries would not fully recognize its functions either. Under Rabbani, the official name of the country was the Islamic State of Afghanistan and would

⁹ Islamic Society, a Tajik politico-military faction founded in 1967 by Burhanuddin Rabbani and whose most famous commander was Ahmad Shah Massoud (Oxford Reference n.d.).

exercise its rule through an Islamic Council. As well as Washington, most countries kept the ambassadors elected by the previous government as representatives of Afghanistan; however, this didn't mean that they recognized the Northern Alliance as the legitimate authority of the country. The continuing factional fighting in Afghanistan kept the majority of the international community from taking a position in favor of either side. (Bridgeman and Anderson 2022).

During the five years of the Taliban rule, the United Nations Security Council and the General Assembly had adopted up to nineteen resolutions undisputedly or consensually. The decisions asked mainly for the cessation of hostilities between factions in the war, the avoidance of any outside interference in Afghanistan's domestic issues, an ending to military supply from external sources, compromise on protecting UN's workers and facilities, and finally the investigation of mass killings of prisoners of war as well as civilians (Murthy 2002).

One of the main burdens of UN resolutions and United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) was the refusal of the organization to let a delegation of the new Taliban regime enter the General Assembly. This created an environment of distrust as the organization and its members were favoring the Alliance by permitting their delegation to sit among them, while the Taliban were controlling the vast majority of the country. To maintain the impartiality of the mission it was argued that the UN should have approached the issue in another way where none of the parts of the conflict was favored. It was later considered that they could have followed an approach on the issue as the Organization of the Islamic Conference¹⁰ did "keeping the Afghanistan seat vacant so that all the parties trust the UN in its humanitarian and other activities" (Murthy 2002).

Regarding Afghanistan's neighbors, there are two of them that need to be highlighted due to their involvement in the faction's conflict: Iran and Pakistan. Each one has been supporting a side due to their different goals, which in fact are common, the stabilization of a government that can maintain the stability of the region. They have also had a role in the

¹⁰ Current Organization of Islamic Cooperation

international status of the country, as they have been the link of the parts in conflict to the outside world (Palka 2001).

Specifically, Pakistan would help the Taliban to prevent the expansion of Afghan's anarchy into its territory; the ex-Soviet republics would have assisted the Northern Alliance in attempting to avoid the spread of religious fundamentalism. The Chinese and Indian governments would have also supported the anti-Taliban factions under the umbrella of the United Islamic Front for Salvation of Afghanistan, as was known that the Taliban were supporting the fight of their Muslim communities, at Xinjiang in China and the Indo-Pakistani disputed Kashmir region (Yew 2022).

As well, the Iranian Republic would have attempted to resist Taliban's movements through the support of the Northern Alliance, to counter the Sunni fundamentalist Taliban influence to spread through the region. Moreover, Tehran also had the moral motivation of supporting the Shia Hazara, which is the most targeted group by the Taliban and is thus one of the main concerns of the Ayatollahs' regime (Tarock 1999).

Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan had been fluctuating due to historical disputes, mainly around the Durand Line's effects, thus the involvement in the faction's struggle has been a national security reason. During the 1990s, Islamabad strategy was focused on installing a friendly government to protect its own domestic interests, and to achieve it the Taliban were supported by Islamabad's intelligence services trying to contain Pashtun irredentism towards Pakistani territory. Strategically Pakistan has also been keen to pursue its Central Asian policy, as with Afghanistan's governmental cooperation it could access the region easily. Islamabad could open a transit route towards the republics' market and benefit from their natural resources such as oil and gas, and on the same line, it attempted to strengthen its position towards India in South Asia. Having a Taliban government with affinities towards their own was the hope to achieve this greater strategy. However, it was considered that their open support since the recognition of the government in 1997 could have undermined its role as an external influence in Afghanistan's territory (MAASS 2010).

Iran's involvement in supporting the Northern Alliance had to do with the same reasons, its own prosperity and protecting the Shia community. The support of Sunni Mujahedeen factions by Pakistan and the US was seen with a political and Islamist containment purpose against Tehran, making the Islamic Republic take part in the struggle of the nineties to

counterbalance their influence in the region. Iran started supporting only the Shiite factions as the Hazaras, until the turning point that supposed the Taliban's capture of Kabul, when started backing other factions that compounded the Northern Alliance. Not only the regional rivalry with Pakistan took them to support the anti-Taliban groups, but they also wanted to avoid the spread of radical Islam towards its territory (MAASS 2010).

In addition to this immediate issue, it is needed to consider the isolation that Iran was facing due to US sanctions. For this reason, the financial means that the republic could provide were very limited, thus the previously stated link to the external support was crucial: Iran was channeling the military support from India, Russia and the Central Asian states to the Northern Alliance factions (Tarock 1999). Moscow as well as the recently independent ex-Soviet republics were also concerned about the spillover of radical Islam or even the Taliban presence towards the young states, as they were still in a transformation phase after the fall of the USSR.

These two immediate neighbors as previously stated would have been a channel for the Afghan faction's international relations. While Pakistan would link the Taliban to states such as Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, Iran would have linked the Northern Alliance to countries as Russia, Turkey or India.

Ankara's principal objective in supporting the Northern Alliance was the containment of an Islamist rebellion inside its territory while attempting to spread the so-called "Turkish model" a secular state for the Turkic peoples in the region. New Delhi pursued a fluctuant position, essentially supporting anti-Pakistani factions; despite alleging that a stable government is the main purpose of its support, is its rivalry with Pakistan that mainly determined its approach (Erginson 2001).

For Saudi Arabia, the Taliban became a great opportunity to spread Wahhabism in Central Asia, which would also expand its sphere of influence. On the same topic, having a Taliban-controlled territory in their favor would help Ryad transport gas through the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Natural Gas Pipeline Project (TAP)¹¹. This project was one of the

¹¹ Recalled TAPI after India joined the project in 2008, it is considered by the own Ministry of Mines and Petroleum as one of the most profitable projects of Afghanistan "The aim behind the TAPI project is to export

most ambitious in the region, and its initial stage can be traced to the nineties, when the CentGas¹² consortium was formed in October 1997 (W. A. Byrd 2017).

Between 1995 and 1997, from the beginning of the negotiations over the gas pipeline project to the signature of the agreement, the interest of the countries involved in its construction showed tolerance to the Taliban government to some extent. However, Gazprom as well as the Californian Unocal withdrew from the agreement by December 1998 proving the inability of the Taliban to join the international community and markets due to their lack of engagement with international actors. During this period, the political instability created an environment not suitable for international investors (Shah 2003).

The US policy towards Afghanistan was unclear due to the involvement of companies' interests on the terrain, specifically Unocal, which even led to the thought that the Taliban government would have Washington's recognition at some point. In the beginning, the American interests welcomed the insurgent's takeover of Kabul, as despite being fundamentalist, it was perceived as an "anti-modern" and not as an "anti-US", thus it was expected to restore security and create a government. However, their systematic human rights violations, persecution of other minorities and exclusion of groups principally Afghan women, deteriorated the US-Taliban relations. This internal convergent interest in the United States explains the ambiguous recognition of the Northern Alliance and the factions in conflict as their companies were seeking the stabilization of the country through whoever could provide the instability (MAASS 2010).

The crisis peak of the nineties period (before 9/11) occurred in 1998, after the bombing of the United States embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in early August, what provoked the reaction of Washington on the 20th of the same month. The Americans sent missiles to

around 33 billion cubic meters (BCM) of natural gas annually through 1,814kilometer (km) of the pipeline from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India" (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan n.d.)

¹² Abbreviation for the Central Asia Gas Pipeline Limited. A consortium formed by six companies to construct the TAP pipeline, led by US and Saudi's companies Unocal (46,5%) and Delta (15%) respectively share holds, and followed by the 10% of Gazprom (Russia), 6.5% Itochu (Japan), 6.5% of Impex (Indonesia Petroleum), 5% of Hyundai (S. Korea), 3.5% of the Crescent Group (Pakistan) and 7% of Turkmen Rosgaz. (Shah 2003)

Osama Bin Laden's camps in the East of Afghanistan in response to al-Qaeda's responsibility for the attacks; moreover, the Taliban did not allow the international terrorist to go on trial and address their accusations. This act would have confirmed the Taliban's threat to the international community and raised awareness of the danger of their actions, which finally ousted them from power after the attacks of the 9th of September 2001 (Shah 2003).

3.2 Second Taliban Period (2021-Present)

The failure to neutralize the Taliban insurgency after twenty years of war, and Washington's withdrawal of its troops to put an end to its longest war in history, provoked the collapse of the weak institutions that the Afghan Republic built after the toppling of the radical group. While the official government was in control of the major cities and concentration of people, the Taliban was contesting its authority and taking the countryside, an essential sector of the State (J.Sullivan 2021).

The group was estimated by 2021 to be between 50-60 thousand fighters operating through a decentralized web under a "shadow government", which was able to accomplish due fact that they were holding the operations from Pakistan soil and getting funding from illicit opium trade. Due to the inability to cease the violence, the United States appeared to consider that the constant killing of Taliban fighters was not the path to engage the intra-Afghan peace talks of the insurgents with the government of Kabul. "Basically, there is no victory to be had in fighting against an organization which knows how to recruit fighters, obtain a profit from the narcotics industry, and maintain a safe haven in a neighboring country" (J.Sullivan 2021) and by admitting this fact through the redirection of their plans, the Taliban proved their strength.

Taliban's regime in the second period shared the same general aspects of the nineties one, the religious figures dominating the politics, Pashtuns ruling the country with no minority representation in the government as well as no women among them. Both governments not only shared almost the same structure but also nine ministers repeated positions. Moreover, the role of the Shura has augmented as it raised the number of members from 12 in the first period to the 26 that can be found now, showing that the level of religiousness in the government is even stronger nowadays (Priego 2021).

The mentioned religious body is called Quetta Shura, the council that worked as the shadow government during the American presence, which is compounded by the top figures of the Taliban, managing to operate from exile and work as a decision-making body. It is a hierarchical model that evolved through the years and despite preserving this structure its administrative body is compounded by diverse commissions and departments (Rehman 2022). Also important to mention is the Haqqani Network, a terrorist organization that worked closely with the first Taliban Emirate (with an essential role linking the insurgents with the ISI) which now finds itself with at least five of its members in governmental positions (National Counterterrorism Center 2022).

Other changes can be related to their attempt to show progress in the eyes of the international community, as can be the addition of new figures as the Prime Minister, Mohammad Hassan Akhund, and two Vice-Prime Ministers, Abdul Salam Hannafi and Abdul Ghani Baradar (Priego 2021). Nevertheless, the supreme leader of the country is in charge of taking every decision. This position is held by the Emir Habaitullah Akhundzada¹³, who is settled in Kandahar and never appears in public. He is never present in Kabul since August 2021 and he refuses to contact directly with any other foreign country or organization (Ramond 2023).

The negative position of the Emir, the Prime Minister, and the President of the Supreme Court Abdelhakim Haqqani towards establishing international contacts has been contested from inside. It can be found an opposition group willing to engage with foreign leaders for the well-being of the country and the regime led by the Interior Minister Abdelhakim Haqqani (leader of the Haqqani Network) and the Mullah Yaqub, son of Mullah Omar in charge of the Defense Ministry. These official figures have criticized the radical rupture with the international community that the government attempts. Nevertheless, their differences are not strong enough to create an internal conflict that could threaten the regime, as there is nothing as a moderate branch of the group to oppose the actual emir (Ramond 2023).

The main threat that the Taliban was facing in the first period was the Northern Alliance coalition, which was the only opposition group that could be supported to become an alternative to the Emirate government, as they were after 2001. One of the factors that was

¹³ a former advisor of Mullah Omar in religious affairs until his death in 2013, he took the leadership of the Taliban in 2016 (Ramond 2023).

thought to help the capture of the north has been the more religious focus that the Taliban have had in this second period, in contrast to the Pashtun domination approach. There was also growing dissatisfaction with the Kabul government's treatment of northern leaders such as Abdullah Abdullah, who after tying the election with Ghani in 2014 was given the title of “Chief Executive”¹⁴. That is why the creation of tensions between the central government and its attempts to weaken the strong figures of the North (especially after the 2019 presidential elections, where both obtained tied results), and the increasing religious sentiment among its people, made it easier for the Taliban to take the wealthiest region of the country during their offense (Farr 2022).

Most of the Northern Alliance leaders, including President Ghani, fled the country after the collapse of the state's institutions, not finding anymore this group as an opposition or alternative to the Taliban rule. This aftermath made Ahmad Massoud, son of Ahmad Shah Massoud create a new resistance movement, the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF), which was also called Second Resistance as thought as a replacement of the former Northern Alliance. The NRF was settled in the Panjshir Valley, about 150km North away from Kabul in the high mountains perfect for guerrilla tactics, nevertheless, the strong counterattacks against the Taliban proved little success (Farr 2022). Being aware of their losses Massoud entered negotiations with the Emirate in January 2022 during an official visit of the Taliban in Iran, asking for an inclusive government, positions on the ministries and a decentralized government (J. B. Murtazashvili 2022). After the negative answer of the Emirate to accede to any of the concessions asked by the NRF, the leader and most of the group fled Afghanistan principally to Tajikistan, where the headquarters are found.

In addition to this group created after the takeover of Kabul and the collapse of the government and national army as an opposition to the Taliban, new insurgencies have emerged in the Afghan context. The Liberation Front of Afghanistan, which pledges for an ethnically pluralistic government against the Pashtun domination of the Emirate, it may seem similar to the NRF but does not appear as affiliated to it and it is neither specified from where

¹⁴ A position nonexistent in the Constitution that invented by American Secretary of State John Kerry after tied elections of 2014

they operate. They have alleged that the Taliban are terrorists that are starving the country, kidnapping and killing its women, civil activists and journalists (Mills 2022).

In the Northeastern province of Kapisa can be found the National Front for Free Afghanistan, which released a video in Pashto and Dari, what might indicate that is compounded by different ethnicities. They also included women speaking on it and facing the Taliban government, which they consider “occupiers” which are willing to fight from the mountains of the region. Other less successful groups compounded by Turkic peoples also appeared in the Afghan landscape, the “Wolf Unit” led by the son of the Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, Yar Mohammad Dostum, and the Turkestan Freedom Fighters. However, none of them have achieved anything by holding their operations (Mills 2022).

These anti-Taliban insurgencies are not a threat yet to the Taliban government, what the group really fears is the Islamic State of the Khorasan Province (ISKP), the local branch of the Islamic State. This terrorist threat emanating from Afghan soil poses a hazard to the region in general, making its containment a key issue for the Emirate to not only its own security interest but also for the image they are willing to build in the eyes of the international community. The Taliban have increased and improved the counterinsurgency strategies, killing strong figures through a series of raids launched since 2022 and decreasing the number of attacks of the group. However, international powers are still worried about the capacities of the group (International Crisis Group Report 337, 2024).

This time no government has shown explicit recognition of the Taliban Emirate in Afghanistan as they have been proving little change in its governmental skills. The repetition of the exclusory norms of minorities, especially women and girls from public spaces, has been the main concern of the international community and the principal reason to not accept openly its government. The edicts emitted from 2022 to 2023 in women’s rights had worsened their already fragile relations towards the West; however, despite the fact that their regional neighbors also reject the treatment of women and the perpetuation of the considered “gender apartheid”, they need to establish some connections to a regime that seems to stay, and which existence is a threat to regional stability (International Crisis Group Report 337, 2024).

For Afghanistan’s neighbors, the takeover of Kabul posed a dilemma, the anti-Taliban groups that previously supported approached them looking for backing against the Emirate.

As the fighting proved inefficient after twenty years, regional actors started engaging with the Taliban as a better option than isolating them due to the increasing perception of security threats from the territory, making a better choice to cooperate to a greater or lesser extent depending on the country. On the same line, Afghanistan's Emir Habaitullah Akhundzada showed its will to maintain good relations throughout the region while referring to not interfering in Afghan issues in exchange for the same from their part (International Crisis Group Report 337, 2024).

Nevertheless, the approach of the regional countries cannot be thought of as fully recognition even though some of them are holding diplomatic missions. Giving them authority and getting involved with them has been justified with the attempt to co-exist with the regime and a way of making them engage with common agendas, specifically in security and economic matters.

Since the takeover of Kabul, the Taliban appears to have changed international 'allies' in the wake of China's growing prominence and unease over Pakistan's historic alliance. In their attempt to rejoin the international community, the Taliban held talks not only with Islamabad and Beijing, but also with Moscow, Doha, Tehran and even New Delhi (Yousaf and Jabarkhail 2021).

China was the first state to formally accept a Taliban-chosen ambassador since they took power, and the first one to appoint an ambassador for Kabul's office on the 13th of September 2023 (Tewari and Ng 2023). Beijing's government enjoys the best relations with the Emirate, with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on its agenda, and willing Afghanistan to join the project, Chinese business have increased their involvement in the Taliban-ruled country (Felbab-Brown, BROOKINGS, Russia-Afghanistan relations in the aftermath of the Moscow attack 2024).

Along with Pekin, Russia also has been advocating against Western sanctions on the Emirate. Moscow has been providing the Taliban with intelligence and military supplies since 2017 in order to confront the ISKP and as well the Western troops (Felbab-Brown, BROOKINGS, Russia-Afghanistan relations in the aftermath of the Moscow attack 2024). Its embassy in Kabul remained open and in 2022 Afghanistan's office in Moscow was handed to the Emirate representatives. Moreover, Vladimir Putin stated on May 28, 2024, that the Taliban was out of its list of terrorist organizations, which could be considered as a

further step towards recognition (Siddique 2024). The main concern for Russia is the terrorist spillover and keeping the Taliban close is an attempt to avoid terrorist attacks from their soil. At the same time while the West is stuck in its relations with the Emirate, this rapprochement is helping Russia improve its position not only in the country but in the region in contrast to the Western countries willing to isolate them.

Iran's position is far different from the previous period's, enjoying the deepest connection to the supreme leader and his inner circle in Kandahar. Iran kept its embassy open in Kabul and gave the Afghan Embassy in Tehran's control to the Taliban at the beginning of 2023. The internal problems of Kabul pose a threat to Iran's own security as from it comes illegal migration, drug and weapon trafficking, reasons to follow a pragmatic approach to coexist and work on the challenges. As well, Afghanistan's stability and relations are key in Tehran's "Look East" agenda, which aims to promote energy and economic ties with countries such as China and India (Lamm and Winter 2024).

While Iran's position increased its value for the regime, this time the relations between Pakistan and the Taliban have been more tense due to the violent non-state actors operating in their territories. Islamabad has accused the Emirate several times of sheltering Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an insurgency attacking its security forces, while the Taliban have blamed them for doing the same with the ISKP. The terrorist attacks on their soil, accompanied by the negative of the emirate to help Islamabad contain the threat have put to an edge the historical support of Pakistan to the regime. The Afghan embassy in Pakistan was taken by the Taliban by October 2021, and due to the direct terrorist threats arising from the Pashtun-ruled country, Islamabad had to use different measures to punish the regime which cannot contain the spilling security threats into its borders. In order to put pressure on Afghanistan, they have paused their efforts to engage Afghanistan with the international community, closed temporarily their borders, accused the Taliban of breaking their agreement with the US on counterterrorism, and mass repatriation of Afghan refugees at the end of 2023 (International Crisis Group Report 337, 2024).

Among the few countries that are willing to take the risk and invest in Afghanistan along with China or Iran, we find Turkey supporting local firms. Turkey's consulate in Istanbul was controlled by the Taliban at the beginning of 2023 and before the end of the year, the Embassy in Ankara was also in the hands of the group (Kabul Now 2023). Since the

reconquest of Kabul, Ankara has tried to interact with the Emirate, as the rest of the world, demanding an inclusive government. Turkey's interests in the country start from the presence of Turkic peoples among the ethnicities in the territory, whose support is important for the soft power strategies held by its Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) (Güzeldere 2022). This organization from the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism keeps operating in the country, providing humanitarian support and education facilities between others for Afghans to date. As the Undersecretary of the Turkish Embassy in Kabul would have stated "The Turkish Government would stand in solidarity with the people of Afghanistan and continue to help them under any circumstance, just as how it had carried out assistance activities in the country with all its institutions in the past" (TIKA 2021), being after reiterated by the coordinator of the agency, who talked about the special role of Afghanistan in their project development.

An improvement of the situation in Afghanistan is also crucial for Turkey to prevent mass migration flows and boost its economic involvement in the territory. The Foreign Economic Relations Board of Turkey is interested in the potential of those precious natural resources that Afghanistan has to offer. However, they claim a reconfiguration of their economic environment, government and national infrastructure in order to participate more actively in the territory, which can also help to reduce the migration trend by giving Afghans employment (Güzeldere 2022).

To show the esteem in which the Taliban hold Turkey, they invited a delegation along with Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran and Qatar to the ceremony organized to present the new Islamic Emirate. The role of religion has been crucial, considering Ankara as "brothers in faith" as the AKP of Erdogan has stated that their religious beliefs are not against theirs. However, they have still ignored their demands on girls and ethnic rights that are holding them to recognizing their legitimacy, keeping their reunions as informal meetings with no flag (Güzeldere 2022).

India's embassy reopened in 2023, while the Afghan diplomatic missions in its territory are still contested between the former government and the Taliban's attempts to take them (Siddique 2024). India has been developing projects in the country since the Taliban were taken out of office in 2001, expending billions of dollars in reconstructing the country mainly through investing in infrastructure as well as humanitarian projects in education, water

management and health. One of the most important constructions of New Delhi was the Zaranj-Delaram highway connecting both countries through Iran's Chabahar Port by sea. Through this construction India avoids the prohibition of Islamabad on New Delhi to transport goods to Kabul passing by its territory. Abandoning the country's connections that they have been building for years was not an option for India, and on the same hand, these links and good relations have also aimed to prevent anti-India Islamist militants from planning and launching attacks in their territory from Afghan soil¹⁵ (Majumdar 2021).

The former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have all Taliban-appointed ambassadors representing Afghanistan. Tajikistan on the other hand has been opposing the insurgents openly and still has in its embassy the former Afghan government appointed. Baku reopened its embassy in March 2024, but it is not confirmed yet if there is any Taliban representation in its territory (Siddique 2024).

Further in the region, in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and the UAE both kept their embassies in Kabul and the emirate has representation in most of the Afghan diplomatic missions; in the case of Qatar, they have the best relations, having engaged on the highest level after hosting since 2013 the key political office to the US-Taliban negotiations. Qatar is a key actor in the relations between the West and Afghanistan, while it has been perceived as a threat from Saudi Arabia. This time, Ryad has avoided recognizing the emirate as fast as they did in the first period, following a strategy closer to the Russian or Chinese perspective (Faheem y Khan 2022).

Doha still maintains that the recognition of the Taliban is not on the table, playing its broker power it has called the international community to at least establish multilateral bodies to assist Afghanistan. They role as the official space where to negotiate the issues regarding the Taliban and the international community was proved in May 2023 by holding the first reunion of the so-called Doha Process. These meetings have the objective of setting a coordinated approach to the Taliban government and the challenges that face the Islamic Emirate. As well as the second round which was held in February 2024, these talks did not involve any Taliban representation, on the initial one they were not invited and in this one

¹⁵ Specifically the pan-Islamist presence of Laskhar-e Tayyiba and Jaish-e Muhammad in Afghanistan (International Crisis Group Report 337, 2024)

they refused to attend the invitation of the United Nations as disagreed with their treatment as the Afghan civil society was also invited while the group was not even recognized the facto as Afghanistan's government (Watkins 2024).

As the dilemma posed to the Taliban's neighbors, the United Nations needed to face the demands of the West and the regional actors. While the first ones would not want to develop their relations any further with the regime until it adheres to the Human Rights standards, mainly changing their approach to women, its neighbors seek the stabilization of Afghanistan for their own prosperity. For the latest meeting, the UN made concessions for the Taliban to participate, not involving the Afghan society this time, which increased international criticism towards an organizational approach that was carried out in order to put on the table the Taliban together with the international envoys of the UN. While officially meeting the international appointees may seem like a small victory for the Emirate, the talks still didn't bring any further development to any side, Taliban recognition nor Afghan women as the West reclaims the group (Watkins 2024).

The latest defiant regime to international sanctions was Nicaragua, being the first and only country in the West to appoint a non-resident ambassador in Kabul in June 2024, and second in the world after China, the country where the diplomat will be settled. The decision of Nicaragua came under the approach of the government to totalitarian regimes such as Iran, China, or Russia, where the president has been looking for support to palliate the sanctions imposed on its government under the accusation of severe Human Rights violation (Aburto 2024).

As much as the stability of the region that may emanate from cooperation between Kabul and its neighbors is important for Europe for preventing waves of migration, drug trafficking and terrorism in its territory, their common position with the rest of the Western countries is clear. Until the rights of girls and women are respected and extreme edicts cease, the Taliban government in Afghanistan will not be recognized and the sanctions will not be lifted. Moreover, these punishment measures imposed by the block in an attempt to isolate the Taliban regime have limited the engagement with the rest of the international community and its neighbors (International Crisis Group Report 337, 2024). The recognition has been used as a pressure tool to advocate and promote women's rights, preventing them from economic, diplomatic and political benefits. In addition, the bloc, especially the United

States as have been the negotiators of their come back, cannot trust yet the will of the Taliban as they didn't follow the initial promises on Human Rights between others. In 2022, just one year after the takeover of Kabul, Ayman al-Zawahiri, one of the terrorists that perpetuated 9/11 and successor of Bin Laden was killed on Afghan soil as he was a guest of the Emirate's leaders, what was denounced as a violation of the consensual points signed at the Doha Agreement (Center for Preventive Action 2024).

Nevertheless, Zabihullah Mujahid, spokesman of the insurgent group has asked in the context of the third Doha meeting the respect of their religious and cultural values to help improve their bilateral relations. This is a sign that no changes are going to be made from their side, keeping away the signs of cooperation. This favors the China-Russian position, followed by Afghanistan's regional neighbors, of slowly engaging with the Emirate, fulfilling a space that the West left after twenty years (Faheem y Khan 2022).

Furthermore, among those who are willing and trying to engage with the Taliban government is growing a disillusioned sentiment due to the nature of the regime's internal structure. They have noticed that the diplomats in Kabul have nothing consistent to offer them as the authorities in Kandahar must give them the final approval, which has resulted in a waste of time in negotiations. Particularly is the Emir's position at the top of the chain of command what has been halting further developments. He has consistently refused to deal straight with any foreign delegation or provide any channel to argue the common issues directly. This structure not only complicates the relations with the few countries willing to engage with the regime but may also result in a long-term weakening of relations (International Crisis Group Report 337, 2024).

4. Economic Field

As explained above, the continuous war situation that has plagued Afghanistan has greatly deteriorated its economic capabilities. The national infrastructure, both physical and governmental, has suffered from the consequences of the ongoing conflict, making it impossible to take advantage of the real capabilities that its geography has to offer.

In the same way, it has affected the region's neighbors, given the instability of its government and the hostilities in the territory, it has not been possible to develop regional projects that effectively connect Asia from its heartland, taking advantage of its unique location.

Therefore, after the circumstances of the first and second governments have been recounted, we will be able to see whether the Taliban government is stable enough to carry out regional ambitions such as the aforementioned TAPI project that could boost the economy not only of Afghanistan but of the region as a whole.

Among the biggest challenges facing the economy, both in the past and today are climate change, sanctions, illicit drug trafficking and government policies. The rapid growth of its demography as well as the ban on women of education and working spaces have also been part of the factors shrinking Afghan economy.

4.1. First Taliban Period (1996-2001)

From the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to the takeover of the Taliban the economic infrastructure was destroyed and millions of people fled the country, among them the most skilled personnel. Due to these conditions, the situation in which the Taliban found the country's economy was critical, in 1997 for example, the budget of the government was not more than 100.000 dollars (Priego 2021).

The lack of expert labor able to improve industry and transportation reduced the economy to subsistence farming as they could not get to other markets with the excess crop before it got spoiled. The agricultural potential of Afghanistan was thought to meet the necessities of its population; however, the conflicts, earthquakes and droughts have encouraged famine. Around 67%-85% of the population belonged to this economic activity, for their own

consumption or trading, while only 12% of the territory is suitable for cultivation (Palka 2001).

Goat and sheep pasturing was the principal family income and one of the most important parts of the agricultural economy¹⁶, which produced 365,8 metric tons every year. The already mentioned nomadic Pashtuns are mainly engaged in herding these animals apart from swine and cattle, an activity held mainly in the Hindu Kush region, and which stays on the local consumption. As the most important sector of the Afghan economy, it was limited to the regional and local level. The lack of transport infrastructure, as previously stated the conditions or inexistence of railways or highways diffculted the access to other markets (Palka 2001).

Moreover, the drought waves, especially during the year 2000 devastated crop production, not being able to provide aliments for its own people and forcing the Afghans to rely on humanitarian assistance. As the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations would have reported, the severe droughts of the year 2000 ruined the wheat and barley crops, which only rely on rainwater to grow, but also irrigated cereals decreased by about 33% its production compared to the previous year. However, this is not part of a particular year but was following a trend: total cereal production that year was estimated at 1,82 million tons, which meant 44% less than in 1999 and 53% compared to 1998. As well other secondary crops such as rice or maize decreased in the same way by 53% from 1999 and a total of 66% from 1998. This affected not only the settled population but also the nomads and those that do transhumance for a living, which added to the scarce employment opportunities out of the agricultural sector and the lack of livestock made it a challenge to purchase aliments (FAO/GVIWES 2000).

Afghanistan went from exporting around a 70%-90% of its natural gas to the USSR to producing almost nothing during the 90's decade, only in Jawzjan. This Province in the North was using this resource just for local consumption. The pipeline system started being constructed in 1967 with connections to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to export to the Soviet Union, which made it feasible to build the needed infrastructure to reach the Black Sea and Western markets. It is important to notice the regional context of the nineties, the emergence

¹⁶ Until the increase of poppy cultivation in the country

of new republics brought new possibilities to the table. Despite that they were still well tight to Russia, they were new players rich in natural resources to negotiate within Central Asia (Palka 2001).

At the same time, Washington's containment policy on Iran would promote its neighbors' economic projects in an attempt to prevent Iran from benefiting from the new opportunity that came with the fall of the Soviet Union. This window that helps Tehran become the regional powerhouse supplying the region's oil and natural gas led the US to seek an alternative route. That is why they considered linking Afghanistan with Pakistani territory to connect Central Asia's resources to the world market, even though it is a more complicated route in all aspects but mainly due to Kabul's instability. It created a conflict of interest between Iran and Pakistan. Tehran was already connected to the region through its border with Turkmenistan and could give them access to the sea, an easier infrastructure to build; while Islamabad's option had to involve Afghanistan in its project to reach the Central Asian republics, which presented a difficulty for the development of the route; the volatile Afghan environment could not ensure the viability of large-scale projects. With the control of Mazar-I-Sharif by the Taliban close to the borders of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and their commitment to allow the construction of the Central Asia – Afghanistan – Pakistan route, the Western companies started the negotiations of the project by the creation of the already mentioned CentGas consortium in 1997 for the development of the TAP project. Through this ambitious project the Taliban government as well as Islamabad would have received billions of dollars for the construction of the pipelines and later on millions in revenues for exit fees (W. A. Byrd 2017).

However, the rule of the Taliban, perceived in the beginning as a great development to boost these international projects soon became a burden. The oppressive edicts of the Emir towards girls and women and the systemic violation of Human Rights didn't allow the recognition of their government and the involvement in greater projects. CentGas and international institutions' refusal to invest money in Afghanistan since 1998 was accompanied by another burden for the deal, the insecurity that the Afghan terrain presented. From financial blackmailing to the kidnapping of the expatriate staff and the bombing of the constructions by insurgents made the TAP project inviable due to the instability and the lack of capacities of the Taliban government to provide long-term security. Thus, it proved the unsuitable conditions of the country for international investors, not enabling the Taliban to take

advantage of their location possibilities as well as natural resources exploitation (Tarock 1999).

In an attempt to boost the oil and gas industry, the Taliban took control of the Afghan Gas Enterprise and the Afghan National Oil Company and started the reparation works of the distribution pipeline close to the Northern province of Mazar-I-Sharif in 1999. These efforts were in vain as the United Nations Security Council issued a resolution that would freeze the funds of those properties controlled by the Taliban, halting its capacity for fossil fuel exportation. In this way, the great potential of Afghan soil has been limited by the Taliban's treatment of its population which hindered its relations with the international community and have impeded its development (Palka 2001).

As already described in the physical dimension, Afghan soil is rich in natural resources, however, during this period was not exploited properly due to different reasons. The amount of income received by this source is not clear during this period due to the decentralization of its extraction, which was made by tribal leaders that controlled the territory where they were found. It is known that about eight million dollars in rough emeralds were extracted during the 1990s, tribes would pay fees to the Taliban in order to continue their activity, while some others would be taken under Taliban control, as was the machinery for gold extraction in Baghan, which was moved to Kandahar. One of the main reasons that the government could not face the exploitation of this sector was related to the remoteness and isolation in which the resources were spared throughout some parts of the country. The harsh terrain that characterizes Afghanistan has diffculted minerals' extraction, as well as its transportation. It should be added that this could have been palliated by the investment of foreign actors in roads and extraction infrastructure, nevertheless, the constant conflict made it impossible to embrace the funding as happened to TAP project and CentGas consortium's dissolution (W. A. Byrd 2017).

Although the development of these sectors under a strong government would have been very beneficial to the Taliban regime, what they really financed themselves from was opium production. As agriculture was mentioned as the principal economic activity, it is the production of poppy seed, which domain the irrigated lands around the principal rivers. Among the causes that fostered the population to rely on this cultivation was the global deficit in heroin supply after the governments of Turkey, Pakistan and Iran prohibited it due

to its contradiction with Islamic values. The isolation from legal international markets also affected the increase of this crop, as it made them rely on illicit trade to access some financial source avoiding the sanctions through the trade of this drug in the black market. Unlike food livestock and cereal production, opium has a longer life span and can survive long journeys without spoiling; moreover, it is also a valuable resource being able to provide big revenues compared to the kilos produced, making it an attractive crop for Afghan families to sustain their households (Palka 2001).

But as well as the regional regimes, the Taliban considered opium production against Islamic values, so it was not always this way. During their expansion in 1994-1995 they banned drug trade and poppy cultivation, which decreased exponentially the amount of area dedicated to this production due to the fear of the farmers to Taliban punishments¹⁷. However, in 1996 their approach towards these crops changed, letting them grow the poppy seed and developing a system to tax the farmers and give them security. In the beginning, they were charging 10% to the farmers and traders, which evolved to a 20% during the decade and the taxation of heroin labs. This permission and sponsorship of the illicit economy made the Taliban gain the favor of a population that mainly lived from this production to sustain their families (Felbab-Brown 2021).

During this period, Afghanistan became the largest source of opium and heroin in the world, providing around 70% of total illicit poppy seed production. When the Taliban took power in 1996, its yearly production was estimated at 2.200 tons which increased slowly in the following years until it doubled in 1999 with the production of 4.600 tons. Afghanistan's opium revenues reached 200 million dollars during the peak of 1999 due to the increasing trend of poppy crops in Afghanistan since the early nineties (UNODCCP 2002).

In an attempt to obtain international legitimacy, the Taliban took the risk and banned opium cultivation, which reduced its production that year to only 185 tons and made the global supply of heroin fall 75% (UNODCCP 2002). On the other hand, they could benefit from the increasing of the prices derived from the reduction in the offer. Even though they

¹⁷ The United States and the international community in general were seeing this as a positive development and hoped that the Taliban could expand through the country to get rid of its heroin exports (Felbab-Brown 2021)

benefited from the ban, this could only be a temporary measure as for a population mainly relying on this income was an unsustainable decision. Thus, Afghanistan's economic underdevelopment and generalized poverty caused the drug economy to settle its roots among the population making it almost impossible to eradicate under this period.

4.2 Second Period (2021-Present)

The situation in which the Taliban found the country after the takeover of Kabul is much better than the one found in the first period. While as described in the 1990s' period, the government had a budget of around 100.000 dollars, in 2021 it was 1,6 billion dollars. However, 75% of these funds come from international assistance and since the Taliban conquest of Kabul, 7 billion dollars that the Afghan government kept in New York were frozen (Priego 2021). These funds were claimed by the Taliban, nevertheless, the counterterrorism sanctions against the group do not let the US conduct money transfers with them (Savage 2022).

From this money, 3,5 billion dollars were located in September 2022 in the Fund for the Afghan People created between the US, Switzerland's government and Afghan experts in Geneva. This movement is an attempt to revitalize the Afghan economy and help its population without letting it fall into Taliban pockets. Nevertheless, the board in charge of discussing how to use the funds in Afghanistan does not agree on how to proceed with the operations, whose delayed decision is exacerbating the humanitarian crisis derived from the poor economy of the country (TRT WORLD 2024).

SIGAR reported in May 2024 that the US was still the largest donor to Afghanistan through non-governmental organizations as well as public international organizations such as the United Nations. In humanitarian and development aid to the Afghan population, Washington has given more than \$2.8 billion since 2021. However, the report warns that the Taliban are benefiting from this international aid by imposing fees, taxes and licensing or permit fees on those organizations that receive American and international funding in general. In this case, it is only from the US, but all international aid is thus in the hands of the radical group whose funds are frozen by the international community. They also state on the document that only from 2021 to 2023 10,9 million dollars ended up in the hands of the Taliban government. At the same time, SIGAR also informs about the situation that the NGOs and humanitarian

organizations in general are pressured by the Taliban. These have been forced to pay customs and double fee invoices, appoint Taliban-chosen personal, use their material by the government and interfere in the development of projects which undermine the help received by the Afghan people (SIGAR 2024).

In addition, the departure of troops has meant that forty percent of the population living near military bases have had to restart their lifestyles. The recession of this sector of the economy linked to logistics, construction and basically military base activities has caused almost 90% of the population to lose their jobs (H. Khan 2024).

Since 2021 Afghan economy has contracted by 27% which according to the United Nations led to deadlock and doubled unemployment in 2021. “Sectors such as finance have “basically collapsed” and there are no major sources of economic activity such as exports or public expenditure, leaving small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and farmers as the lifeblood of the faltering economy” (Wignaraja 2024) . Extreme poverty is widespread, nine out of ten Afghans do not have access to sufficient food while agriculture is still the country's largest economic sector. Despite being responsible for the country's main activity, farmers are the most vulnerable sector, facing environmental disasters such as drought, floods and earthquakes (USAID 2023).

Around 12,4 million Afghans are suffering from high levels of food insecurity, however, this data has improved compared to 2023 due to the large-scale humanitarian assistance that helped food production and relieved the prices. The price of wheat went down 20%-30% since 2022 as the production of cereals increased from 4,3 million tons in 2022 to 5,2 in 2023¹⁸ (FAOUN 2024).

This time, the eradication of opium production decreed by the Emir drastically reduced opium cultivation by 80% and up to 99% in certain provinces. This production was estimated at 29% of total agricultural production, which has further impoverished the population (UNODC 2023). In the face of this tragedy for the population, the Japanese government has invested \$10 million to alleviate the effects of anti-narcotic measures by finding effective alternatives for farmers, as well as treatment and prevention of use. However, no alternative

¹⁸ However, the FAO estimates that in 2024 it will fall again to an average of 4.3 million tons

at present can replace the benefits of opium production (Zazai 2024). As the UN report states, wheat production can alleviate food insecurity, but while one hectare of it yields 770 dollars, opium would generate over 10,000 dollars, causing farmers to lose over a billion dollars in profits from 2022 to 2023 (UNODC 2023).

The ban on women's right to work and study has hit the economy as well estimating the economy around 1 billion dollars (UN News 2022). After emitting more than 50 edicts restricting their access to public spaces the proportion of working women fell from 11% in 2022 to 6% of total labor (UN News 2024). Moreover, this prohibition on girls and women is not only creating more dependent people for the working population and the economy to sustain but also the main reason for retaining the international community of engaging in trade with the Taliban regime and exploiting Afghanistan's potential.

There is no sign of an economic recovery to alleviate the pressure on the Afghan population. In addition, measures are being taken to support the country's private sector through initiatives such as the World Bank's 'Approach 3.0', which aims to encourage the participation of women in its projects as well as to create jobs in private sectors that can participate in the provision of aid (W. Byrd 2024). An example of the work of this 'Approach 3.0' has also been the approval of the development of the CASA-1000 project to transfer clean energy from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan. In partner countries, the infrastructure is almost complete, while construction in Afghanistan will be externally managed so that revenues and payments do not pass through the Taliban administration (Group 2024).

But it is the big projects involving major powers in the long term that really interest the Taliban. China is a clear example of the country with the greatest interest in the wealth of Afghan soil. This second period includes the discovery of the value of natural resources in the past decade, which is estimated to be worth up to 3 trillion dollars. However, Beijing is aware of the volatile nature of the terrain, making engagement with the Taliban essential to protect its interests, as well as workers and citizens in Afghanistan (Lipow and Melese 2011).

Until the government can provide security in the territory for project implementation, these will also be limited. The Taliban know that China is a great opportunity for the development of their economy, and although in the first period, it was not a major player, this time it has

shown interest in participating in the BRI, a position that China has welcomed by stating that it will conduct activities on Afghan territory (J. B. Murtazashvili 2022).

On the other hand, Beijing wants to connect Afghanistan to the corridor linking it to Pakistan to help Afghan economic prosperity. However, Pakistan's dissatisfaction with the Taliban government may undermine the Emirate's cooperation. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) aims to harness Afghanistan's potential as a hub linking them to the region. This is essential for the development of the BRI, to which Pakistan has been added to provide economic and humanitarian assistance and to secure the ground. To this end, there is a need to increase investment in infrastructure construction and the proliferation of licenses so that Afghanistan can be connected to the Gwadar port in Pakistan as well as to the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC) (Brar 2023).

Not only China has invested in connectivity infrastructure, but Iran has also provided \$75 million to connect Khaf with Herat. This is part of the \$2 billion Five Nations Railway Corridor (FNRC) project to connect Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, China and Iran. In April 2024, the first train load of 1,100 tonnes of coal from Herat Afghanistan to Mersin in Turkey via Iranian territory was launched (Tehran Times 2024). As well, Qatar in October 2023 signed also with the MoMP a 200-million-dollar contract and local companies to develop the Jabal Saraj cement plant in Parwan province (A. U. Khan 2023).

In terms of natural resources, in April 2023 the Gochin company offered to invest ten billion dollars in the extraction and exploration of lithium, essential for the electric vehicles industry that needs it for creating batteries. This promised the Taliban the refining of the mineral on their borders, an agreement that would generate more than a hundred thousand jobs and help rebuild their economy. The offer would also include more investment in infrastructure such as roads, hydroelectric dams and the second Salang tunnel (Ruttig 2023).

China National Oil Company has the contract to exploit the oil of the Qashari fields, already producing since mid-2023, the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum (MoMP) hopes that this production in the Amu Darya basin can reach 100 tons per day. The Chinese company has agreed to invest 162 billion dollars during 2023 and 540 billion more through the next three years, but the hope of the Afghan economists is that its refinement could be held also inside the country. The objective of the government is to become self-sufficient in oil in order to be able to develop oil-needing industries (Qooyash 2023).

With the world's second-largest copper deposit in the world, the state-owned Chinese company MCC has now started its activity. The agreement was signed in 2008 under Hamid Karzai's government, but the lack of security in the country caused it to be abandoned in 2014 (A. U. Khan 2023). The Taliban have taken advantage of this to revive the project and cash in on the \$50 million worth of copper ore in southeast Kabul, finally getting the project inaugurated in July 2024 (STENSON and HASRAT 2024).

The energy sector is Afghanistan's most prosperous sector for reviving its economy and creating sustainable jobs in the country; however, in 2021 it imported 78% of its electricity from Iran, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Afghanistan's renewable energy research, although booming, has yet to be discovered due to a lack of funding, and could take advantage of its solar hours, wind and water resources to not only provide for local needs but could also be exported to other countries (Tahir 2022).

Again, the biggest challenge facing the sector is the lack of international funding due to the sanctions imposed. The Silk Road Company (a commonwealth of Afghan-Kazakh shareholders) has said that it will invest in this sector, while the Ministry of Energy and Water (MoEW) has expressed the need for sanctions to be lifted in order to strengthen this industry that has attracted 100 million dollars by 2024 (Hakimi 2024).

5. Symbolic Field

Due to Afghanistan's orography, its society has historically been structured in tribes and ethnic groups due to their distribution throughout the different regions. The composition of groups found in the Afghan territory is therefore very dispersed, without unifying elements of the nation, what has made it difficult to centralize its politics and state organization. However, the most prominent group in the country is the Pashtuns, from which the Taliban originated.

The creation of Afghanistan's political borders without natural boundaries accompanying them, especially in the north, has divided the different tribes and ethnic groups that have inhabited the area, resulting in some of them having their own state, such as the Tajiks and Uzbeks.. The Pashtuns being the predominant group, concentrated in the east and south but found in other areas, make up more than 40% of the population. They are the ones who identify most closely with Afghan nationalism¹⁹, to which the Taliban belongs. The next largest group is compounded by the Tajiks, 27% of the population being of Persian origin and also following Sunni Islam like the Pashtuns. They are traders by nature and belong to the most highly educated social class, reaching high positions in the clergy, administration, universities and the liberal professions. This ethnic group has always competed for entry into politics, as it has a presence in Kabul, and in cities from the northeast to the west on the border with Tajikistan, a major influence that has led to power struggle with the Pashtuns (Behzad 2011).

The only exclusive ethnic group in the country is the Hazara, a 10% of the total population that lives in the "Hazarajat" region in the central mountains. Here they are up to 80% of its inhabitants yet they are the most persecuted by the Taliban and treated like "pariahs" as a Shia minority with no influence but only the support of Iran. Smaller in size are the Uzbeks, and Turkmen, of Turkic origin they live around the borders with their home countries. These ethnic Turks have been pioneers in the creation and development of industries and business activities in Afghanistan, specifically in the textile sector through the cultivation of cotton, a fabric that has become their distinctive feature. In addition to these notable groups,

¹⁹ As was the Pashtun Ahmad Shah Durrani who the Modern Afghan State.

Afghanistan is home to Arabs, Qizilbash, Wakhis, Aimaqs (nomads), Sikh-Hindu and Nuristanis (Behzad 2011).

The Pashtuns as the largest and most dominant group are spread throughout the country and due to the establishment of the Durand Line are also a minority in Pakistan (although that minority is larger than the Pashtun population of Afghanistan). Territorial disputes between the two countries are still ongoing as the Pashtuns, who were divided, did not accept the Afghan emir's negotiation. As a rule, they are a very conservative people in an environment that made it difficult for them to survive because of the difficulty they had in obtaining living necessities. They have a tribal structure that has been preserved without much change and have managed to survive invasions both from their neighbors and from large empires that have tried to dominate them. Their ability to keep themselves closed to outside forces has been achieved through guerrilla warfare, as the Taliban have waged since their emergence (Minorities Rights Group n.d.)

The Pashtuns are not an homogeneous ethnic group either, but despite socio-economic, political, tribal and linguistic differences, they share a common sense of ethnic identity based on four main elements. Common descentance, inheritance as bloodline is necessary to belong to the ethnic group, marriage only being valid in the case of some tribes; Islamic religion, with almost all of them professing Sunnism; the Pashtun language, despite internal tribal differences; and finally, the "Pashtunwali", the Pashtun code of honor. The Pashtunwali is a mixture of tribal honor codes that existed long before Islam and was later merged with interpretations of the Sharia. It is considered the set of customary laws that define society, culture and way of life. It acts as a unifying element between the different sections of society, and functions as a conflict settler between the Pashtuns themselves, as they do not accept any higher authority. The only authority that they follow is the tribal council, called the 'Jirga' its main purpose is to resolve disputes between Pashtuns and other tribes, and as well is also used to make major decisions (Yousaf and Jabarkhail 2021). If Pashtuns lose their honor, they will no longer be considered part of the collective, and their rights, protection and support from the rest of the community will be nullified (Kakar 2004).

5.1. First period (1996-2001)

Many analysts considered the Taliban to be the result of the Pashtun attempt to subjugate other ethnic groups since the beginnings of this insurgency are found in areas traditionally inhabited by Pashtuns. Ethnic and tribal tensions following the collapse of the communist regime, and the long war fought in the territory without direct international interference, led the Taliban to seek the trust of the Pashtuns. With the support of a frustrated majority, the Taliban were able to get to power and carry out their brutal policies against other ethnic groups such as the Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras, seeking to ethnically cleanse the population in the central and northern regions (Shahrani 2002).

The Taliban follow their own interpretation of Sunni Islam (a mix of Deobandi, Wahhabism and Salafism) well entrenched with the Code of behavior of the Pashtun. The Pashtunwali establishes a series of values that the Pashtun are expected to meet. The "Nang" refers to the honor that every member needs to fight to preserve their own and the family's; if the honor is damaged, it should be re-established by all means, even death. The second one, "Badal" is linked to the previous one, it means revenge and is mostly used to re-establish the honor of the family after a murder or attack on its members. As an alternative to "Badal" they have "Nanawatay" it is forgiveness, when the aggressor goes asking mercy directly, it is normally accepted. On the same moral it can be found the "Melmatsia" or hospitality, every Pashtun needs to offer what they can to their visitors for nothing in exchange, they are also obliged to provide protection to Pashtuns independently of the relation they had previously. Finally, the "Hamsaya" related vicinity and the unity of the tribes against the external biggest threats if they are in danger. In order to understand the treatment of women by the Taliban, is important to distinguish the Purdah and Namus (gender boundaries) to defend or maintain the honor. Here it is established the use of the veil as a boundary in the physical space to maintain gender segregation; however, it is recommended for men and women as a dignity sign (Kakar 2004).

The Taliban made use of these values to rise to power and expand during the 1990s. Through Badal they recruited new fighters by alienating the population against Rabanni's forces due to civilian casualties. They use Melmatsia to help their insurgency efforts, with food and shelter wherever they travel within the Pashtun-inhabited area. The Nanawatay has allowed the Taliban to urge the aggrieved to join the insurgency to restore their honor or avenge the

death of their relatives. But the most important value and the one that explains the rise of the Taliban group is the Hamsaya, putting the Taliban as the strongest group, and the one that was followed by the other tribes to 'defend' themselves. This was how despite the internal Pashtun rivalries, the Taliban became the biggest force in the 1990s, due to the strong union they made with the other tribes by uniting against the terror of the mujahideen and the foreign forces.

The relationship between the Pashtuns and the Taliban is difficult, as not all Pashtuns are Taliban, but the vast majority, if not all the insurgency members are Pashtuns. They have further transformed the tradition to include an ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam, partly thanks to the "madrassas" supported by Saudi Arabia. These were oriented toward a very orthodox brand of Islam that seeks to follow an all-encompassing Salafist model. They applied their law more and more strictly and did not allow any kind of dissent, so even though most Afghans did not follow this interpretation of religion, they had to adapt by force during the Taliban regime (Rashid 2001).

This has made them strictly impose their values justifying them with religion. They have imposed their own rites and festivities on the entire population (including different Pashtun groups with their own tribal traditions), arousing suspicion among Pashtuns who do not share the same interpretation. They have imposed prohibitions on the distribution of images of deceased heroes as they consider it pagan, control over local festivities such as prohibiting the celebration of Nowruz (Persian New Year) children's games, music, and visits to ancestors all under the pretext of being "anti-Islamic". Another demand that many tribes did not share was the extreme interpretation of Purdah and Namus only to the female population, as was the full veil, the burqa. Although they used to wear a veil by tradition, a completely covered woman does not follow the traditional Afghan guidelines.

Through education, they continued their indoctrination-homogenization. Geography, science and history subjects were eliminated, and only religious education was supported for boys as girls had forbidden to study. Women were not only banned from the public sphere, but they were also noticeably absent or impersonalized in textbooks during the Taliban period. The few women who appeared in them did so with gender roles associated and without names (Sarvarzade and Min Wotipka 2017).

The homogenization of traditional practices among other group impositions has marked the love-hate relationship between Pashtun society and the Taliban. Despite not being totally in favor of this dominant majority, many Afghans join their ranks due to the lack of strong alternatives that could effectively oppose the group; in this way and through coercive methods, blackmail and even through involvement in criminal practices such as drug trafficking, is how they managed to arrive and stay in power until 2001. Some theorists consider that rather than an Islamic jihadist insurgency formed by Pashtuns, what they are dealing with is ethno-nationalism. And that is why, rather than calling for jihad, it is basically a nationalist movement like any other inherent to ethnicity, a new version of Pashtun nationalism which, not finding its own state in which to identify itself, goes further and tries to unite all the tribes that have always lived independently under a common culture. Although their discourse, in theory, shows openness to other ethnic groups, in practice this is not the case, which has come to be considered a type of “internal colonialism” (Rashid 2001).

5.2. Second Period (2021-Present)

The perception of the Afghan population at the time of the Taliban's conquest of the country is similar: they were confronting a government in which the Pashtun did not dominate. This time, instead, the Taliban presented themselves as a national liberation movement against international intervention in the country and the corruption of the “puppet” government they favored. The current regime aimed to establish a government that would follow Afghan culture and tradition based on an Islamic system, emphasizing the role of religion and protecting it from foreign threats.

The re-emergence of the Taliban after 2001 had also raised hopes that they had reinvented themselves and that there would be a moderate line of insurgency opposed to the religious extremists. However, this division has been more between those who were willing to come to power through negotiation and those who would fight with arms until they reached power. The extreme interpretation of Islam would follow both groups. In fact, the theory of being a Pashtun nationalist movement has been completely supplanted by the idea of being a Pashtun Islamist movement through which they want to impose their extreme version of Sharia. This is part of the new Taliban image in an attempt to be more inclusive of the ethnic groups that inhabit Afghanistan. In the name of Islam, they recruited Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Aimaqs and even named as commander the Hazara Mawlawi Mahdi in 2020 (Borthakur and Angana

2020). However, the latter was shot down by the Taliban two years later the Iranian border while trying to flee the country, the exact reason is unknown, but some sources have indicated that he had rebelled against his Taliban superiors (Yawar y Ahmad 2022).

Among its promises of change was found the establishment of a more ethnically inclusive government, yet its lists were dominated by conservative Taliban, with only two Tajiks and one Uzbek out of 33 members, and not a single female representative among them. Regarding women's rights, its hope was limited since the beginning as Zabiullah Mujahid, the emirate's spokesman, declared in 2021 that women could work but only under Sharia law (Yousaf and Jabarkhail 2021).

Taliban ideology has proven to be static, although this time they have shown a willingness to be more politically active, both at home and abroad. They now have translators both for ethnic minorities as well as in English to be able to address the international community and participate in interviews to spread their message. Even the Taliban have now found new technologies and social media to be a better tool to spread their ideas rather than the traditional madrassas. The Taliban have advanced in technology, as well as gained political savvy in their willingness to create alliances, economic resources and recognition of their Islamic regime which they have isolated from any international calls for change such as the major women's question (Yousaf and Jabarkhail 2021).

6. Overall situation of the first Islamic Emirate

The Islamic edicts have been key to the development of both, the expansion phase and the consolidation of the emirate, providing light and shade to the international community as well as its own population. While they came as a group that would put an end to the mujahedeen anarchy in the country, abolish opium as anti-Islamic and bring stability to the territory, all remained as empty promises. Once they came to power, they would implant their own tribal-religious tradition on the entire population and would be the greatest source of insecurity for Afghans as well as for the international community.

Afghanistan in 1996 was in a catastrophic situation at all levels. Primarily the Taliban had to cope with a war-torn country with virtually no help to rebuild it. Its terrain was ravaged by years of unceasing war and the effects of climate change. Millions of landmines and chemical pollution added to desertification eventually forced farmers to abandon farms. This resulted in the reduction of half of the country's agricultural capacity and even failed to produce enough food for the population. Mobility in the country was reduced throughout the period with 90% of its transport system in poor condition and poorly connected making it impossible to trade efficiently with the food crop along the country.

This poor network is also among the reasons why the wealth of Afghan soil could not be exploited among their remoteness the insecurity of the mine-plagued terrain, as well as the lack of resources to develop this sector. The Taliban government had neither the infrastructure nor the financial means to develop the industry nor could it count on outside funding. In fact, when the Taliban began to take control of Afghan Gas Enterprise and the Afghan National Oil Company, international sanctions limited their ability to export fossil fuels. When large-scale projects began to be developed, such as the creation of the CentGas consortium for the regional TAP project, the Taliban regime's policies and their inability to provide security caused investors to pull back. The Taliban created an inhospitable environment for international investment.

Recognition of the regime in this period was held back primarily by both the human rights abuses of its population as well as the regime's engagement with terrorist groups. While public opinion pressed not to recognize or invest in a regime that did not respect women's and minorities' rights, the threat of cross-border terrorism as well as insecurity of personnel on the ground was key to international governments to avoid being involved in the terrain

with the example of Unocal's withdrawal from the Centgas consortium. In addition, international action was very important in terms of recognition of the Afghan government, with representatives of the previous government remaining in place while neither the authority of the Northern Alliance nor the Taliban was recognized. Only Pakistan, the UAE and Saudi Arabia took a position in favor of the Emirate's authority, however, it had little impact due to the insecurity emanating from Afghanistan, both economically and politically to develop and maintain its interests on the ground.

The lack of foreign investment and connection of the different Afghan regions, as well as the deterioration of the environment, led to a subsistence agriculture economy. Unable even to trade within their borders, production of primary crops such as cereals declined during this early period. In addition to this, the demographic evolution Afghan population doubled in just ten years, as did the number of dependent people. And it was not only children and the elderly who made up the dependent population; the ban on women's access to work also made them part of this extract. This growth was not accompanied by an increase in state wealth, raising the need for health, education and access to jobs for the new young families. The precariousness of the economy, lack of land connections, and legitimacy in the international market led Afghans to base their cultivation on poppy seed for opium production. The endurance of these products, as well as their ability to be traded on the black market, based the economy of Afghan families on this crop.

In the last years of the emirate, Afghan families suffered another blow. In 2001, a combination of ideology and international recognition led the Taliban to abolish this crop without providing alternatives for the families. This measure was not enough for the international community as its main concern was the threat the regime could pose to other countries by supporting al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. In 1998 with the attack on US embassies in East Africa, the attention started to rise exponentially on this issue, reaching the turning point on the 9th of September 2001 attacks on United States soil. These attacks and the negative of the Taliban to cooperate with the international community by giving Osama bin Laden to the American authorities would have proved the threat posed by the failure to stop the Taliban regime from making Afghanistan a safe haven for terrorists. This was the only cause that made the first Taliban emirate get to an end, provoking the intervention of the US and its allies to stop the international threat.

7. Overall situation of the second Islamic Emirate

When the Taliban recaptured Kabul, the country was at a different point after twenty years of foreign intervention and investment. Not only is there a higher rate of education in society, but new technologies and social media have also reached the country. However, Taliban ideology has remained unchanged and extremist edicts on minority and women's rights also continue to shape the development of their policies both domestically and with the international community.

In this second period, a different approach is being taken by the international community towards the country itself as well as towards the regime. The value of Afghanistan's natural wealth has yet to be discovered, although estimations in recent years have grown from the first emirate's expectations. This has led to growing international interest in the country, as well as investment in these sectors. And not just because of the nature of the land itself, Afghanistan's geographical location is highly valued in the region, being at the center of Asia. This makes Afghanistan essential for the development of projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative of China. Moreover, the approach that actors are taking toward the regime is cooperating with it, rather than directly recognizing them. It is through engagement and investment on the ground that the regional powers are dealing with a regime that is committed to staying in power this time. It is also essential in this period for regional cooperation that the Taliban engage with the provision of security to their neighbors.

The shift in allies in this second period is remarkable. Iran is the closest ally due to the emirate's religious focus, even if they are Shiite; China is also now a key player in the country's development and reconstruction; while Pakistan feels increasingly distanced from the Taliban government due to the threat posed by the TTP to its own administration. Moreover, the Taliban have now managed for the first time to sit down within the UN framework to negotiate, a sign that the organization is counting on the regime to not change in the short term and the need to include it for the good of its people.

In terms of the country's connectivity, the Taliban have had twenty years of reconstruction efforts and investments in roads, passes and tunnels throughout the country, as well as plans to connect the country to its regional neighbors. However, their war effort, as well as the corruption of the previous Afghan government, has led to the deterioration and poor

maintenance of this infrastructure and investment in this sector is still necessary for effective development. In the absence of an effective opposition group willing to stand as a strong alternative to the regime, permanent hostilities have ceased, helping the regime to develop the infrastructure with the help of foreign investors.

The effects of climate change have continued to affect the natural environment, placing Afghanistan among the countries most at risk and least adapted to this phenomenon. The increase in the country's average temperature above the global average, droughts and floods continue to affect the basic resources of the Afghan population; however, food insecurity has improved due to humanitarian assistance that has helped crop production by lowering prices. Although alternatives are being sought to deliver aid to the population, it is very difficult for the Taliban not to benefit from it. Projects such as "Approach 3.0" by the World Bank to increase the capacity of the private sector to include women and create jobs are difficult to implement, increasing the pressure on the Afghan population with no sign of economic recovery since the takeover of Kabul. In addition to this, the drastic reduction in poppy cultivation has again had the same impact on the population as in the previous period.

The biggest security threat they face is the ISKP, both to the international community and to their own regime. If they do not control the cross-border threat it poses to their regional allies, as well as internally to the implementation of projects, they could consolidate their position as international "pariahs" and push away any support. This would further affect a population twice as large as in the first period and increase every year due to Taliban policies that affect demographics such as the role of women and girls in society.

8. Comparison of both Taliban's Islamic Emirates

The starting point of the Taliban in 1996 and 2001 is key to the development of the country in both periods, as well as its regime. While in the 1990s the Taliban arrived exclusively by the use of violence, in the latter they were introduced as a key player in the negotiations for the exit of the United States. This gave them a strong base from which to launch the offensive that took over Kabul, as well as an implicit acknowledgment of their strength as they could not be eliminated during the twenty years of intervention. In the first Emirate, the Taliban had only just been formed and were more focused on expanding their cause than on finding a role for themselves in the international community. This second period has demonstrated their willingness to participate actively in international dynamics, especially through integration into regional projects.

The security of the region depends on the stability of the Afghanistan government, which is why neighboring countries have chosen not to oppose a regime that has managed to survive twenty years of war against American and allied troops. Moreover, the fact that there is no alternative as there was during the first period has made it easier for them to position themselves in favor of reintegrating the Taliban as the government in control of Afghan territory, even if it is not explicitly recognized.

Again, with an ideology that has shown no signs of evolution, women, as well as girls, have been banned from the public sphere, which is the international community's main impediment to recognizing the regime. Despite calls from the rest of the region for change in this regard, they have been completely opposed to any change or meddling in their way of governing. This time, however, it has not stopped them from developing projects with the Emirate. Afghanistan's geographical location makes it vital for the region to include its regime in order to create a hub connecting all of Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

Regarding security, ISKP is the biggest threat the regime now faces, due to the need to protect international interests on its territory, as well as the threats they pose to the outside world. In addition, by negotiating the departure of US troops they have also agreed not to be a safe haven for terrorist groups including al-Qaeda and regional jihadist movements that were linked in the past to threatening China or Pakistan. By expelling members of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement under Chinese pressure, the Taliban have demonstrated the

evolution of their regime as it seeks allies in legitimate states rather than in insurgencies in line with their ideology such as the Uighur Muslims. The case of Pakistan is different, as it still claims that Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan still conducts its operations on Afghan soil. This is a difference from the first period when China did not play a significant role in the country, and now is a key partner; while Pakistan was among the only ones to recognize the first Taliban regime and now feels the Taliban as a threat to its nation.

A major milestone of this government compared to the first is its inclusion in the Doha 2024 round of negotiations. They were included to the detriment of civilian representation, which was excluded at the request of the Taliban. While this is not an explicit acknowledgment, it recognizes their authority over Afghanistan and the need to not ignore them in discussions dealing with their regime.

The relative security provided by the Taliban takeover has also restarted projects abandoned in the first period such as TAPI due to a lack of security and trust in the Taliban. In addition, it has attracted contracts to build the infrastructure needed to extract minerals such as copper and to exploit the oil fields in the Amu Darya basin. This will help the Taliban to generate the legitimate revenues that it was unable to obtain during its first period. Moreover, the goal now is to turn Afghanistan into an energy-self-sufficient country by developing a sustainable energy sector. This could revive the economy and provide the population with sustainable and legal work as an alternative for farmers who have lost their crops due to the new opium ban.

Conclusion

The Taliban have proven to be the only group capable of dominating the Afghan landscape and although they have not yet been recognized internationally, they are gradually consolidating their rule. While it is true that their brutality is a common worry in the international community, they cannot be ignored, as the fate of their people goes with them.

Although ideologically they have not shown signs of openness, they have demonstrated their willingness to engage with the international community. This time they have more means of communication such as the involvement of translators in multiple regional languages and English. Moreover, the principle they appeal most to the international community is to let them rule under the precepts of Sharia in their territory and they will not interfere in the affairs of other governments. The only factor that may undermine the links that the regime is developing its own internal leadership structure. As different governments have complained, the chain of command in Kandahar with the final say in every decision slows down processes whenever the Emir disagrees with a decision. This may undermine the efforts of governments that establish connections with the regime, although this is something the Taliban are playing to their advantage, as they know their regional importance.

However, like the first government, the treatment of women and girls as well as minorities remains the factor that retains their international legitimacy as an international government. This ban not only retains their international legitimacy but also deprives them of further projects and investments beyond their immediate region, in addition to the monetary loss that this exclusion causes. The Emirate should look to other Islamic regimes such as the Republic of Iran, now a regional ally, as an example of involving women and girls in society, schools and jobs under a regime that is also based on the Sharia. This should be needed also in an attempt to show signs of real progress, as governing a state cannot completely obviate half of the population from the public sphere.

Although the emirate's inclusion in the international system is a long process, it has already begun through the development of cooperation on the Asian continent, as well as its participation in UN negotiations, where it has strengthened its position of power in the country as the sole authority. The main reason for the organization's desire to establish contact with the extremist Taliban is the lack of alternatives to its dominance as they had

with the Northern Alliance during the first emirate. In addition, learning from the mistakes that the organization made in the first period by excluding them through the course of the years, they have proved their need to be included in talks. If the Afghan rulers are again ignored, and this time without a consistent alternative to replace the regime, they will eventually only have a hostile approach to the international community that will not help the Afghan population and women, who are the main reason holding back recognition.

Afghanistan's geopolitical importance, both in terms of its location and natural resources, are the main reasons that bring the Emirate closer to recognition through diplomatic action and the development of regional projects. As the only authority with which to negotiate, the Taliban also become the key to combating and preventing terrorist groups from establishing their base with Taliban support in Afghan territory, which was the biggest mistake of the first Taliban emirate and the reason for its end. If the Taliban can prevent al-Qaeda or ISKP as well as other extremist movements from using their soil to plan terrorist attacks against other countries and a 9/11 catastrophe is not repeated, they will not really be ousted from power or seriously threatened by the international community. If the Taliban have learned from their biggest mistake during the first period, they will remain in power until internal opposition emerges to threaten their rule.

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