



# Taliban attitudes and policies towards education

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## Key messages

- There are significant debates and differences of opinion within the Taliban on education. There is a tension between the preferences of the Taliban's traditionalists and hardliners, and those who recognise that Afghanistan needs more diverse and more modern ideas and approaches within its education system. Even so, there is still a far stronger emphasis on, and preference for, Islamic education.
- The Taliban's education policies are aspirational – and practices on the ground often differ from or fall short of 'the rules'. The Taliban has had a long tradition of articulating bureaucratic ambitions before having the resources and coherence to realise them. Written policies, however, signal the Taliban's intended direction of travel and its vision for the future.
- Many of the most contentious aspects of Taliban policy, such as female education, are barely addressed within the official 'rules'. This ambiguity allows the Taliban to accommodate various opinions within the movement and adopt a wide range of practices on the ground. It has also enabled the Taliban to sidestep pressures from the international community, which would like to see a more progressive stance, and potential resistance from more conservative elements, who would object to any such shift.
- Education in Afghanistan is heavily reliant on international aid – a fact which the Taliban does not readily acknowledge. This raises questions about whether the Taliban adequately understands how essential international support is to maintaining access to education, and how the Taliban would react to donor conditions on aid in the future.

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## About this paper

This paper is an output of the Centre for the Study of Armed Groups at ODI. The Centre provides rigorous analysis, tailored solutions and a safe space in which to discuss the challenges of understanding and engaging with armed groups.

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# Contents

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<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>About this paper</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>List of boxes and figures</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 Approach	7
<b>2 The Taliban’s evolving policies in education</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1 Pre-2001 Taliban attitudes towards education	8
2.2 Post-2001 Taliban attitudes toward education	10
<b>3 Current Taliban policies governing education</b>	<b>13</b>
3.1 The Taliban’s education philosophy	13
3.2 The Taliban’s education bureaucracy	14
3.3 Civilian and community outreach and involvement	16
3.4 Religious education	18
3.5 State schools	19
3.6 Inclusion and minority groups	22
3.7 Attacks on education and school closures	22
3.8 Female education	23
3.9 Higher education	24
<b>4 Implications</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>28</b>

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# List of boxes and figures

## Boxes

---

<b>Box 1</b>	What the Taliban layha says about education	<b>11</b>
<b>Box 2</b>	Excerpted Taliban provincial education guidelines	<b>20</b>

## Figures

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<b>Figure 1</b>	School enrolment in Afghanistan	<b>10</b>
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# Executive summary

The Taliban's stance on education has dramatically evolved over the past two decades. In the early years of the insurgency, the Taliban orchestrated and publicly condoned attacks on teachers, students and schools, seeing them as symbols of the foreign occupation. These attacks, however, provoked an intense civilian backlash in some areas of the country, forcing the insurgency to reverse course and allow schools to operate. Its position continued to evolve as the Taliban gained territory and sought to transform itself into a shadow state capable of governing. The Taliban now not only permits formal schools, but increasingly seeks to influence, control and take credit for the provision of education.

Insurgencies the world over, from the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka to Boko Haram in Nigeria, have sought to attack, resist, influence or control access to and the content of education. However, the Taliban's level of interference, and the growing sophistication of its approach, sets it apart. It has developed a series of policies and bureaucratic guidelines governing education provision and established a shadow education ministry, with education shadow ministers at provincial and district level and monitors charged with overseeing schools in Taliban areas.

In December 2020, news broke that UNICEF and the Taliban had negotiated a formal national agreement to run up to 4,000 community-based classes reaching 120,000 students in areas under its influence. While education providers have long negotiated with the Taliban, they have usually only done so on a very small scale and in secret. Yet news of the UNICEF–Taliban deal – thought to be the first such national-level agreement of its kind – aroused relatively little controversy. With Taliban influence steadily increasing throughout the country, delivering education is simply impossible in much of Afghanistan without Taliban support.

That the Taliban is willing to negotiate a national agreement with a UN agency

demonstrates its desire for aid – and international recognition. Now engaged in political talks with the Afghan government in Doha, the Taliban is increasingly seeking to position itself as capable of governing. Its desire for power and legitimacy is reflected in its education policies, but so are the tensions between political pragmatism and ideology. The insurgency is far from monolithic and its members' views on education are not uniform. Some segments of the insurgency's leadership acknowledge that Afghanistan needs a diverse, modern education system. They also understand that, if they want external recognition and political legitimacy, they will have to make concessions on some of their more hard-line positions, particularly on female education. Yet there are still many in the insurgency, particularly on the ground, who might object to certain concessions or refuse to allow certain approaches.

While the Taliban wants more education resources and to be recognised for supporting education, it is increasingly trying to control and shape how education is provided. The fact that the education system is heavily reliant on international aid should give the international community and Afghan civil society leverage over the Taliban's practices. Yet there has been little coherent strategy or action to influence its policies to date.

This paper explores the Taliban's education policy, how it implements that policy on the ground, and the degree to which there may be room to influence it. This analysis aims to help aid agencies, diplomats and others advocate in favour of core human rights and access to education for all. The Taliban's policies and practices are not black and white, and there is considerable geographic variation. Understanding the factors that have shaped these various positions is essential to engaging with the Taliban on education, now and in the future – regardless of what may happen in the Doha talks and any future political settlement.

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# 1 Introduction

This paper analyses Taliban policies and attitudes towards education, and compares ‘the rules’ with practices on the ground. The core document analysed is the Taliban’s overarching education policy, which outlines the vision for education, the rules governing its provision, and the Taliban High Commission on Education’s bureaucratic hierarchy. Akin to a national strategy for education, the policy is professionally printed, neatly bound and distributed to Taliban officials throughout the country. The authors also draw on Taliban-issued guidelines or directives on various aspects of education and public statements issued by the movement.

The paper begins by tracing how Taliban policies and attitudes towards education have evolved from the 1990s to the present, before focusing on current policy and practice. It examines the Taliban’s educational philosophy, which centres on both spiritual and practical objectives. It then outlines the Taliban’s shadow education infrastructure, delineating the various positions and procedures and how these relate to the Taliban’s military command. The paper then focuses on the substantive aspects of Taliban policy, including community involvement,

religious education, female education and higher education, before concluding with a discussion of the implications.

## 1.1 Approach

All Taliban documents were obtained directly from sources on the ground beginning in 2016; some are dated and others not. The overarching Taliban education policy analysed here was obtained, in Dari, in 2019; there are some inconsistencies and errors, leading the authors to assume that it might be an early iteration (misnumbering of articles, for instance). Each policy document was carefully translated, in some cases more than once, and these translations were independently reviewed. The authors nevertheless take full responsibility for any errors or misinterpretations. In addition, the authors, who have written extensively (independently, jointly and with others) on Taliban governance, draw on their prior analysis and fieldwork to compare the policy with practice. Several informal key informant interviews were conducted to verify and contextualise Taliban policies.

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# 2 The Taliban's evolving policies in education

## 2.1 Pre-2001 Taliban attitudes towards education

One frequently asked question concerns how much the Taliban's stance on education has changed since the 1990s. There are several ways to answer this. One part of the answer is that the Taliban is a very different entity now, and its approach to governance writ large has changed substantially. When the Taliban came to power in the 1990s, its core objective was restoring Islamic purity and values. Many of its edicts reflected what it 'believed to be the model of the early umma (community of the faithful) surrounding Prophet Mohammad' and 'aimed to transform society as a whole' (Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, 2014: 184). Education was viewed as a means through which to reform a corrupt, broken society and restore Islamic values. To that end, the Taliban added new religious books and further Islamic instruction to the curriculum and removed 'offensive' subjects, among other measures.

Beyond that, however, the Taliban had little plan for the education sector, and little capacity to run it. People working in education at the time paint a picture of a sector dominated by disarray and deprivation (and less by ideological concerns). One Islamic scholar who took up a high-ranking education position recounts that he felt bound to fail no matter what he did, given the dire state of a system devastated by decades of war and the regressive attitudes of many Taliban officials. He

recalled that there was 'no money, no help, except some of the Gulf countries funding only Wahabi-type madrasas, and the only books we could get were from Pakistan'.<sup>1</sup> In 2000/2001, only 29% of boys and less than 1% of girls were enrolled in primary schools.<sup>2</sup>

The Taliban did try to devise a clearer and more coherent strategy over time. The provisional constitution, drafted by the Taliban government around 1999 (but never finalised), outlines an aspirational vision for education.<sup>3</sup> It declares that the government will provide compulsory, free education up to intermediate level. It also obliges the government to develop specialised and secondary education (although this does not appear to have happened), and allows private citizens to establish religious school and (subject to government authorisation) non-religious schools. It is worth noting that many of these provisions are consistent with Taliban education policies today.

The most notorious aspect of Taliban education policy in the 1990s, however, concerned female education, and there are lingering questions about the degree to which the Taliban has 'changed' its position on this. Curiously, the Taliban typically insists that it never 'banned' female education; indeed, there does not appear to have been any specific decree to that effect. The draft constitution declares that the 'education of women is regulated within the limits of the Islamic shari'a by a special law', but it is not clear what special law this refers to.

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1 Interview, Kabul, March 2018.

2 Retrieved from <http://data.uis.unesco.org/?ReportId=51>

3 Draft constitution quoted from translated version reproduced in Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn (2018).

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Taliban officials typically argue that they simply could not support female education during that period.<sup>4</sup> In order for them to permit female education, male and female students would have to be segregated. They would need female teachers and separate schools for girls and boundary walls and transport so that girls could commute and study discreetly. The Taliban claim they could not obtain the necessary resources for all of this. Regardless of the rationale they present now, the fact is that the vast majority of girls' schools were shut under the Taliban, and the movement clearly imposed severe restrictions on women's ability to participate in public life (including teaching) and access basic services such as education and healthcare.

The more the Taliban was criticised by the international community for its treatment of women and girls, the more it appeared to have dug in its heels. It often portrays the international community as disproportionately hostile to the Taliban government and implies that the supposed concern for Afghan women and girls masked ulterior motives. Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahed said in 2012 that the Taliban government 'tried to contact many foreign NGOs for funds [for girls' education], but none were ready to provide actual assistance ... they deliberately left the issue of girls' education unsolved in order to use it as a pressure tactic' (reproduced in Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, 2018: 6,228). This is still a sore point for the Taliban, and some of this suspicion persists.

To be clear, there is little doubt that the Taliban is revising history on this issue. However, it is also important to acknowledge that Taliban

attitudes and practices, then as now, are not monolithic. The crackdown on female education was harsher in some places, particularly in cities (including Kabul). In some rural areas of the country,<sup>5</sup> the Taliban quietly allowed schools for girls to run alongside schools for boys.<sup>6</sup> Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, for example, reported educating more than 13,000 girls in 1997 alone (Najimi, 1997). Some former Taliban officials say that they favoured easing restrictions and tried to advocate for a more lenient policy. Some even claim they sent their own daughters to underground schools.<sup>7</sup> One former Taliban official said that these girls' schools 'were never secret – yes, we tried to keep them secret from people with the [Taliban Ministry of] Vice and Virtue – but my daughter and some others [daughters of Taliban officials] were going there'.<sup>8</sup> While female access to education was profoundly limited, at least in some places there was room for negotiation.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that Afghanistan itself has dramatically changed since the 1990s. There have been enormous advances in education in the country. School enrolment has increased by a factor of nine since 2001 (see Figure 1). The Afghan government spends more on education (approximately \$17 per capita, or over 35 billion afghani annually) than most comparable low-income countries (World Bank, 2019; Ministry of Finance, 2019). Part of this is down to the fact that the international community has invested substantially in education, resourcing more than half of the government's education expenditure and allocating significant off-budget

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4 Authors' interviews. See also Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn (2014).

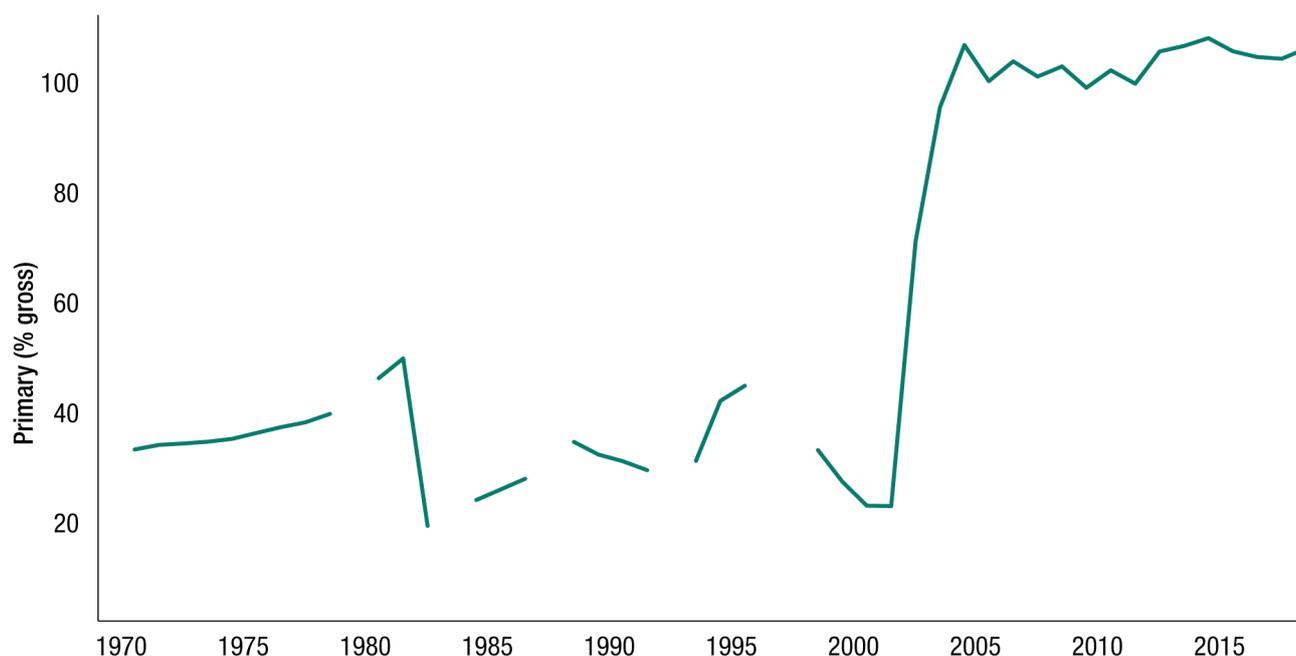
5 This includes parts of Ghazni, Logar, Kunar, Khost, Bamiyan, Laghman, Nangarhar, Paktia, Paktika and Wardak (see also Najimi, 1997).

6 See also Rubin and Rudeforth (2016); Jackson (2018); Rugh (1998).

7 Authors' interviews.

8 Interview, Kabul, July 2017.

**Figure 1 School enrolment in Afghanistan**



Note: official statistics in the education sector are not necessarily reliable, and should be treated as indicative at best.  
Source: World Bank World Development Indicators (<https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&country=AFG#>).

funding.<sup>9</sup> There are still formidable challenges and stark inequalities: half of all Afghans aged 15–24 are illiterate, enrolment and attendance are significantly lower for female students, corruption is endemic, education statistics are often inflated and unreliable, and both access and quality are better in relatively secure, urban areas than in rural and conflict-affected areas (World Bank, 2018; Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee, 2017).

Regardless, the Afghan education system and educational attainment levels have dramatically improved since the Taliban was in power. While many ultra-conservative norms remain, the Taliban’s position and policies have nonetheless evolved alongside this, in part driven by a recognition of just how ill-equipped the movement was to govern in the 1990s. While its education policies might have aroused little controversy among its traditionalist base,

they were deeply unpopular with much of the population.<sup>10</sup> In recent years, the Taliban has sought to present a more modern stance on education that seeks to preserve at least some of the post-2001 gains in the education sector.

## 2.2 Post-2001 Taliban attitudes toward education

The evolution of the Taliban’s post-2001 stance on education can be divided into three phases: opposition and hostility; acceptance; and co-optation. At the outset of the insurgency, schools were seen as a symbol of foreign occupation and considered legitimate targets for attack. The 2006 layha, or code of conduct, forbids ‘work as a teacher under the current state – which is a state in name only – because this strengthens the system of the infidels’ (see Box 1). Attacks on teachers were encouraged in the 2006 layha, with the express purpose of forcing them to

<sup>9</sup> The way the Afghan government records donor on budget contributions does not allow certainty or complete clarity in this regard. Between 2011 and 2014, aid accounted for 62% of Afghanistan’s total revenue, divided between operating and capital investment grants. Donor funds also support operating expenditures, but government data does not report the share of this support (see World Bank, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Pont (2000).

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### **Box 1 What the Taliban layha says about education**

#### **2006 layha**

- Article 24: It is forbidden to work as a teacher under the current state – which is a state in name only – because this strengthens the system of the infidels. True Muslims should apply to study with a religiously trained teacher and study in a mosque or similar institution. Textbooks must come from the Mujahedin period of the Emirate.
- Article 25: Anyone who works as a teacher or mullah under the current state – which is a state in name only – must be given a warning. If he nevertheless refuses to give up his job, he must be beaten. Of course, if a teacher or mullah continues to instruct contrary to the principles of Islam, the district commander or group leader must kill him.
- Article 26: The organisations [NGOs] that come to the country are tools of the infidels. In the guise of serving, they are destroying Islam, so all their activities are banned, whether it is [building] roads or anything else, or clinics or schools or a madrasa or anything else. If a school fails to heed a warning to close, it must be burned. But all religious books, for the sake of respecting them, must be secured beforehand.

#### **2009 layha**

- Section 8. Education
- Article 42: All the activities regarding education in the structure of the Islamic Emirate shall be according to the principles and guidance of the Education Commission. Provincial and district officials carrying out their educational affairs shall follow the policy of the Commission [this policy is not specified in the layha].

#### **2010 layha**

- Section 8. Education
- Article 59: All the activities regarding education, within the designated organisation structure of the Islamic Emirate shall be according to the principles and guidance of the Education Commission. Provincial and district officials carrying out their educational affairs shall follow the policy of the Commission [this policy is not specified in the layha].

Source: translation of the layha published by the Afghanistan Analysts Network (Clark, 2011).

stop work. The policy dictates that teachers should first be ‘given a warning’, beaten if they continued and ultimately killed if they refused to stop.

Attacks on schools increased significantly after this policy was introduced (Giustozzi and Franco, 2012). Nearly one student or teacher was killed per day on average in 2007, and almost half of all the schools in the south were closed due to violence in 2008 (AIHRC, 2008). Not all attacks were claimed by or can be attributed to the Taliban; an array of other actors attacked or threatened schools (particularly girls’ schools). Nonetheless, it

is plausible to assume that Taliban members carried out their fair share.<sup>11</sup>

The Taliban’s policy of attacking education provoked a backlash in some areas. Afghans typically wanted access to education and saw little to justify school attacks. For example, in much of the south-east the Taliban yielded to community demands that schools (at least for boys) operated during this period – but not in the south (see Jackson and Amiri, 2019). Much depended on social capital and unity: communities with stronger elders and greater cohesion, more typical in the south-east, have been better able to persuade the Taliban (as opposed

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11 Based on numerous investigations and rigorous analysis. See AIHRC (2008); CARE (2009); Human Rights Watch (2006; 2017); Jackson and Amiri (2019).

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to divided communities or those with weaker or dysfunctional systems of customary authority, which are more prevalent in the south).<sup>12</sup>

In the 2009 and 2010 revisions of the layha, the Taliban replaced the provisions condoning attacks on teachers, schools and NGOs with vague stipulations compelling adherence to the Islamic Emirate's 'policies' of education (reproduced in Box 1). Ministry of Education data<sup>13</sup> suggests that attacks on schools had substantially decreased overall by 2011, but local patterns of attacks varied throughout the country. While Taliban in the south attacked schools and teachers, some Taliban in the north (as well as some areas of the east) punished children and their parents for *not* attending school and compelling absentee teachers – in government schools – to show up for work.

The final turn of the Taliban's policy reversal on education came when the Taliban began co-opting government schools. Again, this was a gradual and uneven process, moderated by local exigencies, capacities and preferences. As the Taliban gained greater territorial control, it saw an opportunity to exploit state education provision to

its advantage. The Taliban capitalised on parents' frustrations with corruption and dysfunction in government schools (i.e. teachers were often absent or ill-qualified, and textbooks sold rather than distributed). Taliban education officials ensured that teachers came to work and complied with Taliban rules, that 'un-Islamic' material was excised from the curriculum, that students wore 'traditional' dress rather than 'modern' school uniforms, and so on.

Rather than a parallel state, the Taliban shadow government is more akin to a 'parasitic' one that feeds off the incumbent state and international community. The Taliban shadow government co-opts state education provision, albeit while seeking to correct what it sees as state failures (i.e. absenteeism, cronyism, corruption, lack of Islamic rigour). In doing so, it is seeking to demonstrate that it can govern better than it did in the 1990s and do a far better job than the current government. Thus, Taliban education policies must be read and interpreted in the context of a movement gradually articulating a vision for education to further its political objectives and prepare to return to power.

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12 See Jackson (forthcoming).

13 Reproduced in Giustozzi and Franco (2012).

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# 3 Current Taliban policies governing education

Current Taliban policy is enshrined in documents distributed to Taliban education officials at different levels within the movement. Above all, these documents demonstrate the Taliban's strong desire to regulate, control and shape the provision of all forms of education, what subjects can be taught and who can attend school. The core document appears to be an overarching education policy, consisting of 101 articles divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the policy's goals; Chapters 2 and 3 cover the organisation of education and roles and responsibilities within the hierarchy; Chapters 4 and 5 cover finance and administration; and Chapters 6 and 7 cover substantive aspects of education. A number of other directives and provincial-level guidelines further elaborate the Taliban's rules for education.

## 3.1 The Taliban's education philosophy

The Taliban articulates its core philosophy in Chapters 1 and 6 of the overarching policy. The first objective is to fulfil spiritual needs and development, in so far as education is essential for an Islamic society. Ensuring all forms of education respect and adhere to Islam is a central principle. Many senior Talibs, including those likely to have been directly involved in the drafting of these documents,

were themselves educated in rural madrasas and Islamic institutions. That said, the emphasis on religious education is also profoundly political, reflecting not only Taliban interests in elevating Islamic education but also broader historical tensions that date back to the advent of the modern education system in the 1950s. Finally, in reference to Islamic education, they stipulate adherence to the Hanafi school. No other schools of thought are mentioned.

The second objective is to prepare Afghans to meet 'the demands of the age and the necessities of life'.<sup>14</sup> The Taliban has long publicly emphasised the need for what it often refers to as 'modern' education, alongside religious education.<sup>15</sup> In 2015, for example, the Taliban stressed that, while 'some people, without having any sound proof, think that the Islamic Emirate is against all new developments, modern sciences and resources ... contemporary studies are recommended by our religious scholars as they are obligatory according to Islamic teachings' (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 2015). The current overarching education policy uses similar language, underscoring 'a pressing need to educate the holy teachings of Islam and modern knowledge'.<sup>16</sup> To this end, the policy calls on the Taliban's High Commission for Education 'to take serious steps in order to provide the necessities of life of the present age for the children of the Afghan Mujahideen nation in order to establish educational departments of

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14 Chapter 1.

15 Since at least 2013; see Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (2013).

16 Chapter 1.

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modern sciences ... and to foster them according to the possibilities'.<sup>17</sup>

It is worth noting at the outset that, in many ways, the Taliban's vision does not correspond to reports from the ground. Yet the Taliban's policy and statements matter because they express an aspirational vision for education. The Taliban has had a long tradition of articulating its ambitions via policy long before it has the resources and coherence to bring them into being. While practice on the ground is more varied, the overarching policy tells us a great deal about the Taliban's intended direction of travel and vision for education. Above all, it indicates that the Taliban is preparing to exert more control over the sector.

## 3.2 The Taliban's education bureaucracy

### 3.2.1 Administration and management

The Taliban High Commission oversees the education sector and issues policy. Within the Commission, there is a head (or chief executive), supported by deputies, commission members and various sub-committees and administrative staff. The chief executive is responsible for overall leadership, oversight and control of the Commission. Commission heads are appointed by and report directly to the Taliban's rahbari shura, or leadership council. As such, the rahbari shura can make decisions or provide guidance on any education issue it deems necessary; the Commission, however, cannot make any significant policy decisions without consulting the rahbari shura.

Beneath the Commission there are regional, provincial and district layers. There is meant to be one provincial official supported by a deputy and a sectoral commission, and one district official assigned to each district or group of districts (although the policy implies that these positions only exist in areas where the Taliban has significant influence). Provincial education officials identify and recommend prospective staff to the High Commission once they have

secured the Taliban provincial governor's approval. A similar procedure appears to be in place for district education officials.

Within this, the policy details administrative arrangements, including internal financial transparency and reporting processes. So, for example, the administrative director must check and clear financial accounts daily and, at the end of each month, the provincial administrative director must ensure that the previous month's account is approved by the appropriate officials. The policy dictates that both provincial and district education officers must keep a logbook/ journal to track income and spending on all accounts. Accountability is evidently a priority, but the extensive detail is curious given that the Taliban does not seem to invest much of its own funds in education (even if its policies encourage education officials to solicit donations).<sup>18</sup> Thus, it is not entirely clear what kind of funds these officials are responsible for, where they come from, and what they spend them on. More broadly, the highly bureaucratic nature of what is outlined begs the question how much of it exists in practice.

### 3.2.2 Roles and responsibilities

Article 55: The provincial education official, in all its activities, shall seek instruction from the High Commission. They also shall build cooperation and consult with the governor, district governor, and head of the military commission.

Article 56: The provincial education officials are obliged to oversee their subordinate authorities on better and faster implementation of this policy.

Article 60: Provincial and district education officials shall keep a logbook/

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17 Article 4.

18 This is also supported by independent reporting on the ground. See Ali (2019); Atrafi (2017); Bleuer et al. (2019); Oliphant (2017).

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journal to keep a record of all its revenues and expenses.

Article 61: The district education officials shall try to have monthly visits to schools and madrasa.

Article 63: The district education official, in consultation with the provincial education official, is obliged to make the necessary decision to establish a rural school or Madrasa in the areas where not yet established.

Article 64: The district education official shall record all schools and Madrasas, number of students and teachers, all educational stationaries, and other public properties such as cars, motorcycles, phones etc. in a database. The district education official shall share a copy of the database with the provincial educational official.

As noted earlier, Taliban education policy outlines a strict hierarchy, with the Commission's chief executive in charge of monitoring, controlling, managing and leading all relevant departments. As part of this management, the chief executive informs the education structure of any pertinent new directives and leadership orders. This is a centralised, top-down approach, with, theoretically, hardly any flexibility to adapt education plans to the local context. That said, reports from the ground suggest that military actors, such as provincial governors, can play an important role, and there is significant variability in practice.<sup>19</sup>

Sub-national officials are mainly responsible for oversight and troubleshooting. The education

policy encourages district education officials to directly monitor schools, madrasas and other education institutions by visiting them once a month and bringing together all local education officials to discuss issues and ideas every four months. Monitoring includes 'recording all schools and madrasas in the region' in a 'database' along with all school inventory (seemingly to guard against the corruption that plagues the state education sector).<sup>20</sup> Other monitoring requirements are included in provincial-level education guidelines, which usually focus on reviewing textbooks, monitoring lesson plans and teaching and checking attendance. Local Taliban officials are responsible for resolving whatever problems they find. They must, for example, report shortfalls in education materials, but they are still expected to identify a solution themselves (i.e. through donations or other means).

While cooperating with the military and political wings of the movement, the policy clearly articulates that overall responsibility for schools lies with Taliban 'civilian' officials – which was not always the case, as military actors have exerted greater control in the past (see Jackson and Amiri, 2019). Delineating clear roles and responsibilities in writing may enable civilian officials to push back on military commanders if and when they interfere. It may not always work, but having a neatly bound professional-looking policy, approved by the High Commission for Education, may help in preserving one's turf.

Throughout the overarching education policy, there are several references to how those affiliated with the High Commission must work with their military counterparts. Apart from reporting to the High Commission, provincial education officers must maintain close contact with other Taliban representatives, on the civilian and military sides, to obtain their support and approval for staffing and other activities. New schools or education-related projects, for

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19 One way this variability manifests itself is in how people seek to influence education policy. People would normally seek out the head of the commission or deputy of the commission, rather than the chief executive of the commission. In practice, the head of the commission and deputies mainly carry out activities or sometimes task the chief executive to carry out specific activities or engagements for them.

20 See, for example, Kazemi (2018).

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example, have been known to be rejected by military commanders who see them as a security threat. It is up to the education commission, in theory, to resolve disputes in these instances.

### 3.3 Civilian and community outreach and involvement

Article 6: The High Commission is obliged to attract the children of the nation to the educational institutions through encouragement, compassion and well-treatment, and avoid any ill-mannered approaches in the regard.

Article 17: Every Muslim individual in the country, within their abilities, shall assist the Educational Official in the districts in order to make progress in the Islamic studies and modern science. Type of assistance and contribution may include provision of textbooks, money, computer, laboratory equipment, vehicles, construction of building for Madrasa or school, inviting children into educational institutions and encourage oneself and others to teach free of charge at Madrasa or school, and so on. No coercion and any ill-mannered approaches shall be enforceable.

Article 59: The provincial education officials shall appoint an advising board including academic and religious scholars to the areas where the educational programs are implemented in order to raise awareness about the importance of school and Madrasas and to encourage the capable and wealthy to establish private schools and Madrasas. The provincial education

official shall obey the High Commission in all relevant activities.

Article 62: The district education official is obliged to encourage the management, teachers and students of schools and madrasas about their academic affairs through good morals and kindness during the visit.

One surprising aspect of the policy is its emphasis on outreach to civilians. The policy instructs provincial and district officials to conduct extensive outreach to community members, and that they should do so with ‘encouragement’, ‘good morals’ and ‘kindness’. This suggests that the Taliban wants to portray itself as a champion for education, rather than an enforcer. This extends to attendance and learning, with education to be pursued ‘through encouragement, compassion and well-treatment’, and that the Taliban should ‘avoid any ill-mannered approaches’.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, the policy stresses that ‘no coercion and any ill-mannered approaches shall be enforceable’, and that Taliban education officials should use ‘good morals and kindness’ to encourage good behaviour from teachers and school staff.<sup>22</sup> Reports from teachers and students in schools currently controlled by the Taliban paint a very different picture, with Taliban officials using schools for recruitment and intelligence-gathering, some Taliban officials extorting from school staff and teachers, and some Taliban fighters entering schools armed.<sup>23</sup>

In practice, the Taliban tends to use consultation and outreach to appear receptive to community concerns where it is weaker. There is very little discernible outreach in southern Afghanistan, with the Taliban more coercive and less concerned about governance more broadly. By contrast, communities in the south-east more commonly approach the Taliban to ask it to open schools and allow education projects.

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21 Article 6.

22 Article 17.

23 For further documentation, see also Human Rights Watch (2020); Jackson (2018); Smith (2020).

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The greater strength of tribal and customary structures suggests that the Taliban cannot easily ignore community requests. In many areas of the north, the Taliban has been more opportunistic: where it has stronger control, it enforces what it deems necessary without outreach or consultation.

Taliban policy calls on community members to support Taliban education efforts, based on their ability and presumably their wealth: ‘assistance and contributions may include the provision of textbooks, money, computers, laboratory equipment, vehicles, construction of building for madrasa or school, inviting children into educational institutions and encourage oneself and others to teach free of charge at madrasa or school’.<sup>24</sup> The policy also tasks education representatives to address the lack of suitable school buildings and infrastructure, both long-running problems (only half of Afghan schools are currently housed in actual buildings).<sup>25</sup> Given this detailed list of opportunities to ‘assist’, it would be difficult to find an excuse *not* to support Taliban education efforts. Again, this call to action is caveated with an explicit prohibition against using a harsh approach, probably to ensure that over-eager Taliban officials do not coerce support.

Article 8: The High Commission is obliged to liaise with benevolent individuals and charity organizations inside Afghanistan and abroad, and encourage them to cooperate and assist the Afghan Muslim nation in the field of education.

Article 11: Any Muslim Afghan can establish an educational institution, in accordance with the educational principles regulated by the Islamic Emirate, including Madrasa or school, university or expert entity.

Article 12: Any Muslim individual, having established an educational institution, can fund the established educational institution with personal resources or can seek assistance from Muslim individuals or earn a specific fee from the students by a contract or agreement between the parties as remuneration without any coercion and injustice. Seeking assistance from the puppet administrations should be strictly avoided.

The policy emphasises the need to make Afghanistan self-reliant in education, encouraging communities to invest in schools and Taliban officials to liaise with potential benefactors.<sup>26</sup> Yet the idea of self-reliance is a far cry from the aid dependence of the current state system. The policy calls for education officials to fundraise with wealthy individuals inside and outside Afghanistan, and with humanitarian organisations. However, this support must align with Islamic Emirate policies: Muslims must be fully responsible for these schools and operate according to Hanafi jurisprudence and Taliban rules. International aid is not explicitly mentioned in the policy, and the Taliban does not expressly acknowledge its reliance on the state to provide education. It refers to the Afghan government as a ‘puppet administration’ and prohibits seeking assistance from it.

The policy instead demands that community members contribute, implying that communities who want schools must be prepared to actively support and invest in them. This is similar to how most madrasas are run: reliant on donations from wealthy individuals, or small monetary and in-kind support from the community. At madrasas in the Taliban stronghold of Musa Qala district in Helmand, students must provide their own food but pay no fees, and either the community or the Taliban arrange their accommodation. Most teachers are religious

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24 Article 17.

25 See [www.unicef.org/rosa/press-releases/government-afghanistan-education-cannot-wait-unicef-and-coalition-un-ngo-partners](http://www.unicef.org/rosa/press-releases/government-afghanistan-education-cannot-wait-unicef-and-coalition-un-ngo-partners)

26 Article 5.

officials whose income is financed by zakat (obligatory Islamic charitable contributions), or educated community members who typically volunteer. Again, in using the madrasa resourcing model, the Taliban conveniently avoids acknowledging (or expressing any opinion about) the heavy reliance of the state education system on international aid.

In general, genuine Taliban consultation with communities – about education or anything else – is rare. Above all, the Taliban seems focused on ensuring legitimacy and control. The Taliban wants the means and authority to dictate how education is provided. Prospective donors to Taliban-overseen private institutions appear to have little influence on how the money is spent, or the educational approach taken. While the policy emphasis on outreach seems to be on volunteerism, it is unlikely that civilians would interpret any Taliban requests for support or resources as non-coercive. The coercive presence of the Taliban, and its level of surveillance, would make it nearly impossible for communities to refuse cooperation.

### 3.4 Religious education

Article 3: The High Commission for Education, to the extent possible, is obliged to take serious measures to establish Madrasa, for the purpose of Islamic and religious education of the children of the Muslim nation and the Mujahideen.

Article 5: The High Commission, within its financial means, is obliged to encourage the Muslim and Mujahid nation to establish private educational institutions, such as madrasa, seminaries, and Dar-ul-Hefaaz, and foster previously established educational institutions to make our nation self-reliant in the field of education.

Article 73: The other five types (of the institutions) would be established

considering the possibilities and when the grounds are prepared.

Article 74: Rural madrasa are schools that have a long history in the country in which the essential subjects such as Quran, Seerat an-Nabawi (prophetic biography), jurisprudence, beliefs, Pashto, Persian, mathematics, and calligraphy are taught to the children of the village by the respected Imam of the mosque.

Article 79: The purpose of the above-mentioned curriculum designed for the Muslim boy or/and girl is to teach the beliefs of the holy religion of Islam, the necessary ancillary provisions according to the Qur'an, Sunnah, and the Hanafi sect, to teach the necessary reading and writing skills and also obtaining some historical and geographical knowledge.

Article 81: For a Muslim child to be a forever good Muslim, teaching the following topics are necessary and required: teaching the Holy Quran, Tajwid, the hadiths relevant to daily social and individual life, and learning the essential issues/aspects of Hanafi jurisprudence, the necessary Islamic beliefs and knowledge of the Seerat an-Nabawiy (prophetic biography), peace be upon him.

Religious education is the core focus of Taliban education policy. While the Taliban strongly believes that Islamic education is imperative for both society and the individual, there is also a practical dimension. The Taliban uses mosques and madrasas, and religious instruction in schools, to indoctrinate and recruit. In large parts of the country, it has effectively captured and co-opted much of the rural religious elite and their institutions. The Taliban views rural religious figures as its 'base'. Indeed, many such figures actively or covertly provide material and

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ideological support to the Taliban. They legitimate the Taliban, enforce their rules and amplify their influence; in return, the Taliban elevates their status and rewards them. Those who do not support the Taliban are likely to be subject to intimidation and violence. As a result, in many communities under Taliban influence or control, people see religious figures and institutions as deeply entwined with the insurgency.

The policy also seeks to improve the quality of madrasa education. It mandates a three-year curriculum, including Pashto, Persian and mathematics alongside religious subjects. Beyond religious officials, other qualified individuals can act as madrasa teachers. This seems to be a concession that religious teachers might not be very familiar with non-religious subjects, and additional expertise is required. There is a similar push to improve quality in religious seminaries. The Taliban wants seminaries to effectively fill gaps in non-religious teaching between madrasas and schools, and teach ‘modern’ subjects and languages alongside religious study. On the ground, however, Islamic scholars running madrasas and seminaries still typically follow their own rules, and prefer to focus on Islamic education (and less so on Pashto, Persian, mathematics, etc.).

Finally, the overarching policy alludes to broader practices shaping education and pedagogy. District education officers must, for example, ensure that local Islamic teachers regularly receive feedback on how to improve. This suggests that the Taliban is open to new teaching approaches, those who have attended Taliban education ‘seminars’ in Helmand, for example, describe them as a means of enforcing control over teaching and reinforcing Taliban doctrine.

### 3.5 State schools

Article 80: School is an educational institution with the purpose of teaching the modern studies such as science, chemistry, physics, biology, mathematics, geography, history; to

learn important languages such as Arabic, Persian, Pashto, English, etc. Also, to learn Computer and so on.

Article 83: Teaching inappropriate and inaccurate subjects such as anti-jihad topics, immoral and anti-religion topics related to Muslim women, and subjects derived from the infidel laws, and other similar topics shall not be allowed.

The Taliban’s monitoring of teachers and state or private schools, dictating what can be taught and what conduct is permitted, is well documented.<sup>27</sup> The overarching policy acknowledges the need for secular subjects to be taught alongside religious ones in schools. These statements are directly followed, however, by reference to the ‘jihadi arrangement’, which prohibits ‘inappropriate and inaccurate subjects such as anti-jihad topics, immoral and anti-religion topics related to Muslim women, and subjects derived from the infidel laws’.<sup>28</sup>

These restrictions imply that a series of topics included in the state curriculum should be eliminated (particularly within the teaching of history, biology and other technically permitted subjects). While not spelled out in the overarching policy, the Taliban issues provincial-level guidelines that explicitly detail what can and cannot be included from the state curriculum (see Box 2). It is worth noting that the advent of these guidelines predates the overarching education policy. The Taliban began vetting state curricula and issuing similar guidelines in some areas of the country as early as 2011.

These guidelines allow provincial officials some freedom to decide local restrictions, although there are both commonalities and differences across the various guidelines. Most emphasise that certain practices (such as wearing ‘modern’ school uniforms) are against Islamic Emirate rules. But some specific changes to the curriculum appear in one place and not another, suggesting that local norms and preferences play

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27 See Jackson and Amiri (2019); Smith (2020).

28 Article 83.

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## **Box 2 Excerpted Taliban provincial education guidelines**

### **Textbook amendments from Paktia**

Regarding Dari Class 9 (Pashto speaker)

- Page 34: In the topic of Peace and Understanding, patriotism situation has been explained by peace, this topic has to be corrected.
- Page 35: (Subject of Freedom of Expression), in the reasoning, Hadith of Hazrat Zainab (Radi Allah Anho) has been mentioned which needs proper explanation.
- Page 36: In this subject, the infidels' constitution law has been mentioned, and it has to be explained in the light of Sharia.
- Page 36: (The subject of Women and Current Era), in this subject, women have been motivated towards immoral corruption, and it should be considered null and void.
- Page 38: (The subject of Terrorism), terrorism should be explained in the light of Islamic Sharia that who is a terrorist.

Regarding History Class 7

- Page 48: Here, criticism is showed in terms of destroying sculptures which is irrelevant and should be removed.

Regarding History Class 9

- Page 95: Some western expressions like immoral corruption by women and sending women abroad and similarly, women rights issues during King Zahir Shah which is a big issue in terms of human rights is contradictory with Sharia, and similarly all the issues that have negative sides should be explained in a positive and under the light of rights.

### **Instructions on religious teaching from Laghman**

- An Islamic subject should be taught at least one hour every day.
- Islamic subjects should never be taught at the end of the day.
- Islamic Qaida and the Holy Quran must be taught from the first to the fourth grade as below: Islamic Qaida in first grade, five chapters of the Holy Quran in second grade, 10 chapters of the Holy Quran in third grade and 15 chapters of the Holy Quran in fourth grade. In addition, complete prayers should be taught at these times. Students of fourth grade should remember the last 10 verses of the Holy Quran.
- Taleem-ul-Islam, an Islamic book, should be taught as below:
  - Part 1 is taught in fifth and sixth grades
  - Part 2 is taught in seventh and eighth grades
  - Part 3 is taught in ninth and tenth grades
  - Part 4 is taught in eleven and twelve grades.
- All Islamic subjects are mandatory and compulsory.
- Every day before class, a 20-minute lecture should be given to teach students about ethics, cleanliness and other necessary Islamic issues.

### **Instructions on religious teaching from Paktia**

- Religious subjects should be taught at least one hour at the start of the day.
- Religious subjects should be taught prior to the end of the class, which means that it should not be at the end hour of the school day.
- The students from class one to class four should be taught Islamic Qaida and the whole Quran-e-Karim. In this way, Islamic Qaida should be taught in first grade. Five juz (sipara) of Holy Quran should be taught in second grade, 10 juz of Holy Quran in third grade, and 15 juz should be taught in fourth grade. In addition, learning how to pray and its obligations should also be taught during this period, so that students can be able to recite the holy Koran

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## **Box 2 Excerpted Taliban provincial education guidelines (continued)**

in a proper manner once they finish fourth grade, and during the fourth grade, the last 10 verses of the Holy Quran should be memorised by the students.

- In order to implement the third article, it is essential to hire one pious Qari (a person who has memorised the Holy Quran), and all the classes of Holy Quran should be taught by this Qari.
- A book by the name of Taleem-ul-Islam (Islamic Education) in which Islamic principles and orders are explained by Hazrat Mufti Kefayatullah (PBUH) is considered necessary after fourth grade and is as follows:
  - Part 1 is taught in fifth and sixth grades
  - Part 2 is taught in seventh and eighth grades
  - Part 3 is taught in ninth and tenth grades
  - Part 4 is taught in eleventh and twelfth grades.
- In order to implement [this], a pious person that has knowledge of Islamic studies should exist in schools, and religious subjects should be taught by that person.
- Religious and Islamic subjects are considered as necessary and core subjects.

### **Instructions on conduct in schools from Logar**

- No students or teachers can bring cameras or cellphones with cameras into the school or in its property. If they bring cameras, responsible officials must take them.
- School uniforms should be based on Afghan culture and students and teachers should not wear un-Islamic clothes such as trousers, neckties and shirts. The reasons are people cannot afford these things and they are against Islamic values.
- Political parties and political activities organised by the puppet administration and the invaders are banned.

an important role. The Paktia guidelines, for example, dictate that a particular sentence must be edited to align with Taliban gender ideals: ‘this subject’s sentence that says “Zarghona loves to study in Library”, the library should be changed to (home)’ – something which does not appear in guidelines from other provinces referencing the same text. Similarly, not all provincial guidelines deal with controversial issues in the same manner. Guidelines from Kunduz stipulate that pictures of the Bamiyan buddhas be removed, while those from Paktia state that ‘the teacher must explain faults of sculptures to the students’.

Most provincial guidelines emphasise Islamic study, including specific instructions on what Islamic texts are to be studied and when. To be clear, the existing state curriculum includes

Islamic study and is grounded in Islamic values, as mandated by Article 45 of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan’s constitution and numerous articles of legislation and policy documents.<sup>29</sup> The Ministry of Education also supports madrasas and other Islamic education institutions. The acting Minister of Education suggested in December 2020 that religious education be increased and suggested moving some primary school classes into mosques (prompting considerable controversy).<sup>30</sup>

The Taliban wants more time devoted to Islamic learning and for it to be structured differently than it is in the state curriculum. As part of its school monitoring, Taliban officials routinely ‘adjust’ or ‘revise’ lesson plans and timetables to replace objectionable subjects,

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29 See, for example, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2008); Ministry of Education (2016).

30 See Ansar (2020).

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such as art, with Islamic learning.<sup>31</sup> As these requests appear to have intensified over time, it is reasonable to expect that these demands will increase as the Taliban exerts more control.

### 3.6 Inclusion and minority groups

Article 18: Those areas where the linguistic minorities are in the majority shall be provided with primary education materials in their native language.

This article was likely included to prevent accusations of discrimination, and perhaps to enhance the Taliban's appeal to minority communities (i.e. Uzbeks, Turkmen). This is broadly consistent with the current government's approach, but it is unclear to what degree this actually happens in practice. While the Taliban accommodates language minorities, it appears less willing to accommodate the full diversity of beliefs among Afghans. The overarching policy emphasises the Hanafi school of thought, with no mention of other Islamic sects. Shia Islam is not mentioned, despite the fact that Shia Muslims are believed to comprise around 10%–15% of the population.<sup>32</sup> The way the Taliban's current policy is worded strongly suggests that all Afghans would have to follow Sunni Hanafi teachings in schools, but it is not clear from the current text whether it would make exceptions.

Taliban policy on this diverges significantly from the current government's education strategy and legal framework, which equally recognises Shia and Sunni Islam. For example, government policy premises the development of Islamic materials with both Shia and Sunni sects in mind, with the production of separate texts and materials as needed (Ministry of Education, 2016). To be clear, Taliban policy documents make no such provisions. The Taliban could address this by clarifying its stance on non-Hanafi-oriented education, ideally by allowing teaching that follows Shia

principles for Shia populations. While the Taliban has vaguely claimed to embrace certain aspects of Afghanistan's diversity, this policy currently does nothing to allay Shia fears of discrimination and persecution.

### 3.7 Attacks on education and school closures

Article 86: In case there are active schools in any area, the teachers and the subjects taught shall be monitored and controlled properly and in good manner. These schools should be supported and shall not be closed unless there is a legitimate reason.

Article 87: The Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate shall not allow anyone to destroy or burn any school or educational institution. In case the enemy uses the school as a military station or for any other military activities, it shall be considered as a military base not a school.

Since 2009, Taliban policy has been formally against attacks on education and the closure of schools. The current policy emphasises keeping schools open, and maintaining access to education – unless there is a compelling reason to close them. Reasons for closing schools might include a school not abiding by the restrictions or rules outlined above. The Taliban has repeatedly insisted that it provides schools 'with security to the extent possible and tries its best not to interrupt their activities' (Taliban statement, reproduced in UNAMA Human Rights, 2019: 76).

Schools should not be attacked unless they are active military installations (i.e. school buildings occupied by military forces and no longer operating as schools). In the Taliban's view, if an enemy combatant occupies an educational facility, it loses its protected status,

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31 See Human Rights Watch (2020); Jackson (2018); Sands and Qazizai (2016).

32 Current statistics on this are imprecise at best. See US Department of State (2018).

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becomes a military object, and can be attacked. This is consistent with other Taliban public statements regarding schools and the protection of education staff. There are also indications that, with school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic, occupation of (closed) schools by combatants has increased.

It also appears that the Taliban considered schools used as polling stations in elections as legitimate targets for attack. For example, during the 2018 parliamentary elections, the UN reported 92 election-related incidents affecting education, most of them attributed to the Taliban (UNAMA Human Rights, 2019). In 2019, when presidential elections were held, the UN recorded 21 incidents of election-related violence affecting schools, without specifying who was responsible (UNAMA Human Rights, 2020).

While the Taliban appears to mainly follow the policy outlined above, there are exceptions. The UN, *New York Times* and Human Rights Watch, among others, have documented instances where insurgents are alleged to have attacked, threatened or closed schools.<sup>33</sup> Attacks on schools are complex and individual incidents are often hard to interpret in any definitive way. However, what often appears to happen is that local Taliban have an issue with a school and forces it to close; in some other cases, schools are targets of opportunity.

While it is positive that the Taliban outlines relatively clear rules on closures and attacks, and that its fighters mainly follow them, Taliban policy could better enforce and strengthen these provisions. The Taliban could, for example, prohibit the placement of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) around educational facilities. Given that children account for the majority of victims of unexploded ordnance in Afghanistan, the Taliban could commit to and prioritise demining areas around schools (as UNAMA Human Rights and others have recommended). It could also expand the prohibition of attacks on

schools to ban the use of educational facilities by its fighters for military purposes.

### 3.8 Female education

Article 15: All young girls who are not obliged to wear the Hijab due to their young age should be provided with Islamic education in a mosque or madrasa or at the home of a reliable scholar, so that this class will not be deprived of Islamic studies. The Provincial Education Officer shall take serious measures in this regard.

Article 16: When the ground is prepared, the Islamic Emirate, in the light of a procedure in line with Islamic principles, Hanafi jurisprudence and Islamic Emirate's perspectives on education, shall take action to provide women with Islamic and other required sound studies.

Those looking for clarity on the Taliban's stance on female education will come away disappointed. The Taliban has made several gender-neutral statements emphasising the importance of education for all Afghans, and issued at least one public statement endorsing female education. These statements are decidedly nebulous – as are the provisions in the current education policy.<sup>34</sup> In practice, this vagueness allows local Taliban education officials to adapt their approach to prevailing norms and requests. It also helps explain why female access to education under the Taliban varies considerably across the country.<sup>35</sup>

The overarching policy dedicates two of its 101 articles to female education. One pertains to pre-pubescent girls, who should be taught in a madrasa, school or community-based home

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33 Human Rights Watch (2017); Rahim and Zucchini (2019). See also the December 2020 UN Secretary-General report to the Security Council, which records 11 Taliban attacks on schools between July and September 2020 (UN Secretary General, 2020).

34 See Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (2013); Al Emarah (2017; 2019).

35 For more on variation, see Human Rights Watch (2020); Jackson and Amiri (2019).

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school. The article then instructs provincial education officers to ‘take serious measures in this regard’. The next article deals with the education of women, presumably referring to females beyond puberty and thus not covered in the previous article. It suggests that the Taliban will take action on this issue, subject to numerous vague caveats: ‘when the ground is prepared’ and ‘in line with Islamic principles, Hanafi jurisprudence and Islamic Emirate’s perspectives on education’, women can then receive education in ‘Islamic and other required sound studies’. No reference is made to ‘modern’ education specifically for women, as mentioned in the education policy. There is no concrete commitment to the extent and level of education. This reflects the views on female education often heard in the field, and is roughly consistent with the Taliban’s pre-2001 stance.

The vague promise that girls past puberty will be allowed to access education is often, implicitly or explicitly, premised on the Taliban having complete control and enforcing adherence to Islamic principles in all aspects of life, thus making it ‘safe’ for older girls and women to be educated. Several ‘favourable’ conditions must typically be in place for post-pubescent female education to be allowed: girls must be separately educated from boys; girls’ classes must be held in a separate building to boys’; the building must have a perimeter wall; there must be female teachers (in some cases, very old men are acceptable); and girls must travel discreetly to and from school.<sup>36</sup> Like boys, girls are typically forbidden from wearing school uniforms or carrying cellphones. Female teachers and students must wear the hijab. In some places, the Taliban insists girls be educated in a mosque or madrasa instead of a school.

Notably, the Taliban’s agreement with UNICEF to provide education through 4,000 community-based classes, announced in December 2020, includes female primary education. The specific conditions under which this will take place are

still unclear. The Taliban insists that the deal is currently limited to ‘small girls up to the age of eight’ and ‘that the rest will be sorted out gradually’, while a UNICEF official has publicly insisted that they will ensure ‘girls in these areas have access to education’ (Farmer and Yousafzai, 2020). It is not clear if the Taliban is obliged to take explicit action to encourage or enable female education. Presumably, the NGO partners that implement UNICEF’s community-based schooling programme will have to negotiate, as they have long done, with community authorities and the Taliban on the ground to ensure that girls have access to their classes.

One advantage of this approach is that it affirms common ground – agreement on girls’ education below puberty – and builds confidence between education actors and the Taliban, theoretically leaving the door open to expand female education to older students. The danger, however, is that the Taliban ultimately refuses to allow older girls to attend these classes. In this instance, the deal would affirm Taliban legitimacy and control without any significant concessions from their side.

Finally, it is worth underscoring that female education is one of the most obvious areas of policy divergence between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The current Afghan constitution states that ‘education is the right of all citizens of Afghanistan’,<sup>37</sup> a stance the Taliban has not endorsed. The emphasis of Taliban education policy – in both Islamic and secular learning – is focused primarily on boys and young men, and merely leaves the door open for some forms of girls’ education where civilians demand it.

### 3.9 Higher education

Article 95: In the current situation, measures will be taken only to control and monitor the universities. Once the domination of the Islamic Emirate

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36 This often depends on the location of the school and local dynamics. It may be as simple as wearing a burqa or a chador, or being walked to school by a mahram. At a school in Logar, a van was rented to transport female students. At a school in Helmand, the building was constructed so that the entrance for girls was at the back, not on the main road.

37 Article 22 of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Constitution.

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expands, and the grounds are prepared, further measures will be taken to support and manage the universities.

Article 97: When the grounds are prepared, within its abilities, the Islamic Emirate shall take appropriate measures to establish or finance such educational departments or institutions.

The Taliban has not engaged much with higher education, either on the ground or in its policy thinking. The overarching policy acknowledges

universities, stating that the Taliban only seeks to monitor and control university activities. In practice, the Taliban has tried to regulate and monitor some private and public universities, for example by demanding they enforce gender segregation (Jackson, 2018). While the Taliban has recently claimed to be focusing more on higher education,<sup>38</sup> policy documents and interviews with members of the Taliban imply that this is not an area in which it is ready to engage. The education policy does, however, promise that, if or when financing and circumstances allow, the Taliban will establish and run higher education institutions, seemingly focused on religious subjects.

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38 See Al Emarah (2020).

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# 4 Implications

The Taliban's education policies portray an insurgency committed to eventually taking over the education system. In the meantime, it has pursued a strategy of creeping control and coercion, co-opting what it can and coercively shaping how education is delivered on the ground, who can access that education, and under what conditions. This is already impacting education for millions of Afghans.

One curious aspect of this analysis is that, while the Taliban is conscious of its limited finances and human resources, it is not clear that it truly appreciates the level of funding and capacity required to maintain current access to education. The Taliban cannot compete with the level of resources that the government devotes to education. There is little indication that education is a current funding priority for it in any case – so long as it can indirectly benefit from international funding flowing to the Afghan government education system. While the Taliban approach to education is dependent on the government and donors, its policy documents avoid conceding this reality. In fact, various Taliban statements on its website and in private meetings tend to trumpet how much it is doing in this sphere. If it does aspire to exert more control, it will likely have to engage directly with donors and the international community (just as it has done in the deal negotiated with UNICEF). Through process, it may be pressed to make uncomfortable compromises or relent on certain positions – which it presently appears unwilling to do.

That said, there is no indication that those working in the education sector have a viable, coherent and unified strategy for dealing with the Taliban on these issues. This is evident in the reactions to the agreement by interviewees, and the fact that those interviewed on the UNICEF and Taliban sides had different perceptions

about what had been agreed and each side's obligations. Beyond the UNICEF–Taliban deal, most negotiations with the Taliban were local and ad hoc. One advantage to this was that it left room for manoeuvre and for local preferences. To date, the Taliban has been pragmatic and willing to go along with this approach: it is working with what is there, to the best of its capacities, during a time of war.

The problem is that this room for manoeuvre is eroding: Taliban control is tightening in many areas of the country, and it is increasingly interfering in the running of schools. If the Taliban came into government or took control of it, it would be surprising if it did *not* enact significant education reforms. As peace talks turn to substantive issues such as education, the Taliban is likely to press harder to change the system. The current Afghan education system does not reflect the Taliban's worldview, values or vision for the country's future. These Taliban positions are, of course, still evolving and heavily debated within the movement. But in its current policies for the education sector, we see traces of what might be to come: the minimisation of Afghanistan's ethnic and religious diversity, much more significant attention to madrasas and other forms of Islamic learning, a heavy emphasis on Hanafi over (and perhaps to the exclusion of) other schools of Islam, and much more severe restrictions on female education.

These dynamics are not unique to the Taliban or the Afghan peace process. Education is inherently political, and governments and armed groups the world over have long used the education system to indoctrinate, surveil and regulate the behaviour of the population (see Green, 2013; Lall and Vickers, 2009). Lessons may be learned from peace processes and post-war state formation elsewhere, but the single most pressing priority for education

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donors and implementers is to work out how to engage with the Taliban on these issues in a strategic way. This paper has made several tactical suggestions on how to do this – from

pressing for greater protection of schools to advocating for minority rights – but time is running out to effectively ensure that the gains made since 2001 can be preserved.

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