

TALIBAN'S ACHILLES' HEEL: The Leviathan Trap in Afghanistan

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Since their return to power in Afghanistan, Taliban are not only contending with a plethora of violent challengers, but they are also facing direct and indirect nonviolent action by a variety of factors. Their response has been twofold: extreme and indiscriminate violence and information blackout. However, the notion of a strong Emirate has hardly materialized in almost a year since its establishment. Their presumed success in creating absolute stability in the 1990's is now failing in the Taliban regime 2.0.

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JUNE
2022

In the run up to their eventual takeover of power in Afghanistan, the Taliban social media warriors regularly warned of "*bellum omnium contra omnes*" (war of all against all). In Facebook livestreams, Clubhouse discussions and other social media, they constantly reminded supporters, opponents, observers and bystanders of how the Taliban had been the only force capable of ensuring *absolute* stability in Afghanistan since 1979, exemplified by their rule from 1994-2001 as well as their rule over stretches of territory during their insurgency against their predecessor. Their presumed success in creating absolute stability informed their outlook and, subsequently, formulation of their overall aim once back in power. To them, no other socio-political force than the Taliban aspired and had the capacity to enforce the same sets of rules all over the country, even if using extreme methods. Having swiftly swept aside the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *peace*, in its narrowest form as in physical security, became the mantra of the Taliban 2.0. They also managed to oversell the promise of peace in a binary elucidation of commitment and capacity to regional powers and other international interlocutors. Taliban's touted organizational cohesiveness and operational effectiveness in the 1990s strengthened the perception of materialization of the said promise.

In essence, Taliban were and still are promising to create a Hobbesian Leviathan in order to ensure peace. Having lived through the English Civil War of 1642-51, Thomas Hobbes came to the conclusion that there needs to be a strong, undivided and legitimate sovereign, a Leviathan, to ensure order and peace in a society. Taliban, to a great degree, had guaranteed the presence of a strong and undivided sovereign in 1990s. It is the legitimacy that they were struggling with, though they will not admit that.

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Afghanistan opening new fronts against them is making the prospect of a “bellum omnium contra omnes” all real, and that prospect is becoming bleaker with every passing day. There are several attacks every month since Taliban came to power. The Khurasan branch of the Islamic state has particularly made life difficult for the Taliban. Besides, there is an active insurgency in the north east of the country, a region that the Taliban failed to bring under their rule in the 1990s. While the scale and ferocity of the attacks by the IS are easy to measure as they mostly happen against the Hazara-Shia community in the large urban centres of Kabul, Mazar and Kandahar, amongst others, there is a scarcity of information coming out of the provinces of Panjshir, Baghlan and Takhar where the Taliban are battling the National Resistance Front (NRF) of Ahmad Massoud, the son of their former nemesis, Ahmad Shah Massoud. Alarmingly, Taliban’s leadership has recently been targeted too, exemplified by recent coordinated attacks against their defence minister in Jalalabad and on a gathering in Kabul to commemorate the death anniversary of a former supreme leader.

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Taliban’s response has been twofold: extreme and indiscriminate violence and information blackout. Taliban have particularly come down hard on the Salafi community in the east of the country. They have targeted villages that they believe are sympathetic to the IS. Disappearances, killings and ditching of the dead bodies on the roadsides is a tactic they have borrowed from the Pakistani spy agency to dissuade dissent. They have also brought back their scorched-earth strategy of the 90s to target the communities that they assume are providing the manpower to NRF.

Taliban are not only contending with a plethora of violent challengers, they are also facing direct and indirect nonviolent action by a variety of actors. Women and media are at the forefront of nonviolent protests. While Taliban have a relatively strong track record of dealing with violent challengers – with violence, they have a hard time formulating a policy and adjusting tactics to counter the dilemma nonviolent action poses. Nonviolent activists, though insignificant in number so far, have used social media very effectively to expand the reach of their protests, much to the frustration of the Taliban and their sympathizers.

In other words, the notion of a *strong* Emirate (Taliban's Leviathan) has hardly materialized in almost a year since its establishment. And this is in a situation that there is not a single country in the region or afar that supports anti-Taliban elements in Afghanistan. Some countries such as Tajikistan and Turkey may tolerate the presence of anti-Taliban politicians and supporters on their soil, but there is no evidence they are providing them any material support to actively fight against the Taliban. It would become a totally different ballgame should there be a support to the anti-Taliban forces as was Pakistan to Taliban's insurgency against the Republic.

To make matters worse for the Taliban, their failure to stamp their authority – in addition to a number of other failings – has contributed to a level of frustration amongst its ranks never been seen before. This resentment has boiled over to the extent that members of the Taliban are using social media to threaten coming in the open about the corruption, nepotism and lack of meritocracy that has plagued their Emirate. There have even been violent clashes amongst different Taliban groups – unheard of in the 1990s. Just recently, two Taliban groups clashed with each other in the northern province of Sar-e-Pul, leaving several dead and injured. This situation has raised serious questions about Taliban's ability to become an *undivided* sovereign.

Add lack of legitimacy – both indigenous and exogenous – to Taliban's failure to create a strong and undivided authority and there is only one conclusion: Taliban are not the Leviathan they claim or aspire to be. And the quest to become one without establishing some form of *legitimacy* – and some level of accountability – will result in their eventual undoing sooner or later. However, having established that Taliban's Leviathan project is not going as well as they had hoped because of the lack of its three main tenets of strength, indivisibility and legitimacy, it is also important to mention that Taliban will survive – even thrive – in the absence of a viable option: a well-resourced, popular, disciplined and, dare I say, avant-garde opposition.