Taliban Tightens Its Grip on Afghanistan with Arrests, Targeted Killings

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Despite the [Taliban](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/taliban)'s assurances upon taking control of Afghanistan that it would not target its perceived enemies in retaliation, evidence reveals that the de facto authority is actively advancing its bloody record of atrocity crimes with arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture and targeted killings.

In the months leading up to the Taliban takeover in August 2021, fighting between the Afghan military and the Taliban led to a dramatic increase in civilian casualties.

The U.N. found that Taliban forces were responsible for nearly 40% of civilian deaths and injuries in the first six months of 2021, according to a Human Rights Watch (HRW) [report](https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/afghanistan). Women and children comprised nearly half of all civilian casualties.

Among those casualties for which the Taliban was responsible, targeted killings were the third leading cause, the [United Nations](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/united-nations) Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported.

"Listen to the international news media, and it would seem that Afghanistan fell overnight," an Amnesty International [report](https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/ASA1150252021ENGLISH.pdf) read. "The civilians caught in the fighting knew differently."

"The Taliban is an actor that was involved in the conflict of Afghanistan for the past 27 years," Ibraheem Bahiss, a consultant with Crisis Group's Asia Program, told *Newsweek*.

"During its tenure," he added, "it has continued to commit acts that have been a blatant violation of human right or humanitarian law."

Days before capturing Kabul on August 15, 2021, an action that effectively ended the Afghan government, the Taliban declared a general amnesty for the population, announced via mosques, word of mouth and social media, an HRW [report](https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/11/30/no-forgiveness-people-you/executions-and-enforced-disappearances-afghanistan) read.

Nonetheless, targeted killings and other abuses escalated as the Taliban proceeded to forcibly disappear large numbers of people.

"Human Rights Watch is increasingly concerned that revenge killings condoned by senior Taliban leaders are now becoming the basis for a deliberate policy to seek out and execute targeted former government's security officials and others," the report read.

While Taliban officials have repeatedly denied that the organization is carrying out killings and disappearances, there is increasing evidence suggesting otherwise.

"Taliban forces in several provinces carried out retaliatory killings of at least dozens of former officials and security force personnel," HRW reported.

After seizing Malistan, Ghazni, the Taliban killed at least 19 security force personnel. The organization allegedly killed an additional 44 former security force members following its capture of Spin Boldak, according to data from HRW.

In an act of apparent retaliation for what the Taliban perceived as support for the former government, Afghan families, numbering in the [hundreds](https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/afghanistan), were forcibly evicted from their homes in several provinces.

"The Taliban's retaliatory attacks against civilians deemed to have supported the government are an ominous warning about the risk of future atrocities," Patricia Gossman, associate Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said in a [report](https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/07/afghanistan-taliban-forcibly-displace-civilians).

It was arguably the inability of the former Afghan government to adequately address civilian harm that ultimately undermined the stability of the state itself. It was a reality that the Taliban exploited, as people began to lose faith that their needs would be met.

Prior to the Taliban's takeover, the country had a poverty rate nearing 50%, according to the Asian Development Bank, and was already facing an accelerating human rights and humanitarian crisis.

According to Amnesty International, the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) had frequently launched mortar attacks that hit homes and killed civilians in hiding, among other abuses.

The corruption of ANDSF and its harassment of the population had become unbearable, with many Afghans expressing "a weary relief that the Taliban's takeover at least meant an end to bribes on the street and indiscriminate mortar attacks on their homes," Amnesty International said.

"Since the Taliban have taken over, what we want is to be in peace," a father of three who worked as a tailor in Khanabad told Amnesty International. "We can sleep with an empty stomach, but we just want peace."

For the past two decades, the stability of Afghanistan has depended heavily on foreign funding. Under the former Afghan government, aid grants constituted 43% of Afghanistan's GDP and close to 75% of its public spending, according to the [World Bank](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/world-bank).

When the Taliban forcibly seized control of the country, most international donors, including the U.S., refused to formally recognize the Taliban and suspended non-humanitarian funding, freezing billions of dollars' worth of assets.

To this end, the Taliban takeover only exacerbated an already dire situation. It catapulted a country in longstanding conflict from crisis to catastrophe, placing Afghanistan on the brink of [universal poverty](https://www.newsweek.com/afghanistan-expected-reach-98-percent-poverty-rate-mid-2022-un-says-1627854#:~:text=News-,Afghanistan%20Expected%20to%20Reach%2098%20Percent%20Poverty%20Rate%20by%20Mid,Says&text=Afghanistan%20is%20expected%20to%20reach,according%20to%20the%20Associated%20Press.) by mid-2022.

In response to the evolving humanitarian crisis, President Biden signed an executive order on February 11 a[imed at unfreezing some $3.5 billion in Afghan assets currently held in the U.S. to use for humanitarian relief in Afghanistan](https://www.newsweek.com/us-makes-enemy-taliban-angers-afghans-seizing-billions-9-11-fund-1679108), and keeping it out of the hands of the Taliban.

The transfer of the assets will not commence without a further court ruling, the Biden Administration [said](https://www.npr.org/2022/02/11/1080086260/biden-executive-order-frozen-afghan-assets).

Still, for many Afghans the war remains far from over.

"I just hope that member states will finally learn from all the different wars that have been taking place," Hareer Hashim, program manager for Women's International League for Peace and Freedom-Afghanistan section, and an Afghan refugee currently residing in Norway, told *Newsweek,*"and that they will not repeat the same mistake of just sitting around and doing nothing and just talking,"

"And I hope that by the time they're done talking and coming up with a solution," she added, "I hope that Afghanistan and her people are still there."

In 2018, the United Nations recorded a then-record high of 10,993 civilian casualties, [Global Conflict Tracker](https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-afghanistan#:~:text=Direct%20talks%20between%20the%20Afghan,and%20raids%20targeting%20the%20Taliban.) reported. While there was a decline in 2019, civilian casualties still exceeded 10,000 that year, for the sixth year in a row.

2020 saw another slight decline, but the first half of 2021, amid international troop withdrawal, saw a record high number of civilian casualties.

According to most sociologists, more than 1,000 battle deaths a year constitutes a war, Graeme Smith, senior consultant for Crisis Group's Asia Program, focusing on Afghanistan, told *Newsweek*.

Smith added that Afghanistan is currently skirting the line between a country at war and a country not at war.

"UNAMA remains deeply concerned about the continuation of AGE [Anti-Government Elements] attacks deliberately targeting civilians," a [UNAMA report](https://unama.unmissions.org/civilian-casualties-set-hit-unprecedented-highs-2021-unless-urgent-action-stem-violence-%E2%80%93-un-report) read, "including targeting of civilian government workers, human rights defenders, media workers, religious elders, and humanitarian workers, and sectarian-motivated attacks."

"It's not as difficult as we like to make it, and it's not as political as we like to make it," Hashim said. "Afghanistan people are on the verge of death. We've been betrayed by multiple people, and today that has cost us our country."

The decades-long armed conflict in Afghanistan continues to take an extreme and disproportionate toll on civilians.

"I've seen Afghanistan thriving, and I've seen Afghanistan at a state where everyone was in desperate need of help and in desperate need of support and in desperate need of safety," Hashim said.

After seven failed attempts, she successfully evacuated from Afghanistan to Norway on August 25, 2021, 10 days after the Taliban took Kabul.

"The beautiful mountains of Afghanistan still stood tall," Hashim said, "but there was this dead silence."

"You could feel the morbidity that had taken over Kabul's soul," she added. "You don't expect your homeland to be snatched from you, for the ground to be taken away from your feet."