

JIHADIST GOVERNANCE AND STATECRAFT

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LOOKING FOR LEGITIMACY: THE TALIBAN'S DIPLOMACY CAMPAIGN



Looking for Legitimacy: The Taliban's Diplomacy Campaign

■ Aaron Y. Zelin

Unlike in the prior two decades, when the Taliban's power derived from its insurgency and armed forces, the group is now making greater use of a key instrument of state: diplomacy.¹ This is a natural continuation of the negotiating skills it garnered while working out its 2020 peace and withdrawal agreement with U.S. officials during meetings in Qatar. It is also an underappreciated aspect of statecraft that lends more credence to jihadist actors within the international system, even if there remains skepticism. It is a tool that the Taliban has now used to showcase that it is willing to have dialogue with a variety of world actors without actually changing its authoritarian and theocratic rule in Afghanistan locally, by relying on diplomatic-style speak to cover for inadequacies and areas of concern such as women's rights and roles within society.²

Since the Taliban took over Kabul in August 2021, the group has sought international recognition for its Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. When Taliban forces first held the country from 1996 to 2001, only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates recognized their rule. Today, no government has officially done so. Yet while no country has officially recognized the new government established after the group recaptured Kabul, the Taliban is far less isolated today than it was during its first iteration.

Similar to other states, the Islamic Emirate has regularly promoted its meetings

with foreign officials since it took power in mid-August 2021, using official government and media websites and X/Twitter accounts. These encounters covered a wide range of issues, including humanitarian aid, governance assistance, economic opportunities, industrial investment, and religious exchanges. In other words, despite not being de jure recognized, the Taliban is de facto recognized—its Islamic Emirate has been steadily acknowledged via numerous noncommittal acts. Additionally, a number of countries have since called for the Islamic Emirate's international recognition: in March 2022, Turkish foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu called for international recognition of the Islamic Emirate, while Malaysia's special representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Afghanistan, Ahmad Azam, stated similarly in July 2022. Moreover, in March 2022, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov argued that it should be granted a seat at the United Nations.³

WHO IS MEETING WITH THE TALIBAN?

Between taking power in August 2021 and February 22, 2024, the Taliban has publicly announced 1,382 diplomatic meetings with at least eighty countries, or 1,582 meetings if one includes each country's mutual presence at a multilateral event (see tables 1 and 2).⁴

Table 1: Top Ten Countries That Have Engaged the Islamic Emirate

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF ENGAGEMENTS
China	215
Turkey	194
Iran	169
Qatar	135
Pakistan	118
Uzbekistan	84
Russia	69
Turkmenistan	63
Japan	60
Saudi Arabia	54

Table 2: Top Ten Western Countries That Have Engaged the Islamic Emirate

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF ENGAGEMENTS
European Union	42
Britain	33
Norway	31
United States	20
Germany	12
Italy	11
France	8
Netherlands	8
Switzerland	6
Sweden	4

Western engagement with the Taliban has generally taken place at multilateral events, while states from other regions have favored bilateral meetings. This trend highlights the continued Western discomfort with the group beyond international forums focused primarily on humanitarian aid. However, there have been exceptions and increasing willingness to engage bilaterally, especially from the European Union, Norway, and Britain. In contrast, China has met with Taliban officials more often than any other country, illustrating how the Islamic Emirate's return has a great power competition angle that transcends the West's focus on potential counterterrorism ramifications. Foreign Minister Wang Yi and other Chinese officials have been careful to emphasize their policy of noninterference in Afghanistan. On March 24, 2022, Wang planted a commemorative tree at the Taliban's Foreign Ministry compound "in hopes of a prosperous Afghanistan."⁵ Since then, much of Beijing's engagement has been related to business opportunities through the Afghanistan-China Business Association, an organization whose mission reportedly focuses on helping Chinese companies invest in Afghan industries (e.g., antiquities preservation, coal and copper mining, infrastructure, oil and gas extraction, slaughterhouses) while bringing Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative.

WHERE ARE THEY MEETING?

Although most of the Taliban's diplomatic meetings have taken place in Kabul, the second most-used venue has been Doha, Qatar (see tables 3–5 for sites of Taliban engagement).⁶ This is not necessarily surprising, since Qatar developed close relations with the Taliban due to Doha's role in facilitating the U.S. withdrawal agreement from Afghanistan. Doha has served two purposes for the Islamic Emirate's legitimacy efforts. First, it has been where Western nations can engage the new government more comfortably without granting it as much legitimacy as going to Afghanistan would do. Second, and more importantly, from a broader legitimacy-building perspective, Doha has provided a platform for the Taliban to ingratiate itself with many other countries' local embassies in a way not possible in other countries or within its own—most notably, through independence day or other national celebrations of these various countries.

Table 3: Top Ten City Locations Where the Taliban Has Engaged Other Countries

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF ENGAGEMENTS
Kabul (Afghanistan)	690
Doha (Qatar)	225
Islamabad (Pakistan)	62
Tehran (Iran)	50
Beijing (China)	46
Tashkent (Uzbekistan)	26
Ashgabat (Turkmenistan)	21
Moscow (Russia)	18
Istanbul (Turkey)	15
Kazan (Russia)	15

Table 4: Top Ten Country Locations Where the Taliban Has Engaged Other Countries

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF ENGAGEMENTS
Afghanistan	715
Qatar	225
Pakistan	71
China	65
Iran	62
Turkey	55
Russia	37
Uzbekistan	35
Turkmenistan	23
Saudi Arabia	15

The following countries have engaged with the Taliban only in Doha, many primarily through invites to Islamic Emirate diplomats to attend their independence and national holiday celebrations: Burkina Faso, Canada, the Czech Republic, Georgia, Ghana, Greece, Guinea-Bissau, Hungary, Liberia, Malawi, Mexico, Nigeria, Paraguay, Rwanda, South Korea, Spain, Tanzania, and Uganda.⁷ This means that more than 20 percent of the countries engaging the Taliban do so linked to diplomatic niceties, highlighting how Qatar is helping normalize the Taliban's Islamic Emirate with a broader swath of the international community.

Table 5. Western Engagement with the Taliban in Kabul

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF ENGAGEMENTS
European Union	29
Norway	20
Britain	11
Italy	4
Switzerland	3
Germany	2
Sweden	2
United States	2
Australia	1
Austria	1
Denmark	1

While most Western countries remain apprehensive about engaging the Taliban in Kabul so as to avoid giving it added legitimacy, more recent signs suggest that direct Western engagement has occurred as well. In January 2022, for instance, Norway hosted Taliban Foreign Ministry officials in Oslo, which created opportunities for greater international dialogue with Western countries along with Japan, Qatar, and Turkey.⁸ Likewise, other Western nations have begun to work with the Taliban on development, humanitarian, and business opportunities:

- In March 2022 and October 2023, respectively, Swiss and Australian investors met with the Taliban's minister of mines and petroleum about investment opportunities.⁹
- In May 2023, the Taliban's Ministry of Water and Energy and the Danish Cooperation Institute signed a memorandum of understanding on joint implementation of water development projects.¹⁰
- In November 2023, the German company Contra met with the Taliban's Ministry of Mines and Petroleum about potentially providing technical and professional training needed by the Afghan mining sector, and in

February 2024, the German companies Rock Green and Alfa Tec met with the Taliban's deputy minister of water and energy regarding cooperation on potential investments in water and energy projects.¹¹

- Between September and December 2023, Italian companies and Italy's charge d'affaires to Afghanistan met with the Taliban's minister of mines and petroleum about assisting on marble mining operations, and received approval from the deputy minister of agriculture and livestock to operate agricultural projects in various Afghan provinces; both also met with the ministers of public health and the economy about providing basic health services along with humanitarian and emergency aid for Afghan citizens returning from abroad.¹²
- Since May 2022, Norway has been the most active Western country engaging with the Taliban on various projects, most notably on humanitarian aid, education, food provision, economic opportunity, governance capacity-building, and drought-related water projects to remediate the effects of climate change. As of late September 2023, Norway had provided \$70 million to those programs since the Taliban returned to power.¹³ The Norwegian Committee for Afghanistan is also assisting with irrigation, while checking dams, canals, and springs in the Kapisa sub-river basin.¹⁴ In many of the meetings, Norway's ambassador raised issues related to women's rights, education, and employment, yet the Taliban has continued to ignore or obfuscate on these issues.
- In August 2022, the Sweden-based Master Bigrene International Company met with Afghanistan's Ministry of Water and Energy about investing in energy production projects from coal sources, water dams, and the implementation of solar power projects.¹⁵ The Swedish Committee for Afghanistan also met with the minister of economy in January 2023 about implementing health and education projects in remote areas of Afghanistan.¹⁶
- In March 2022, representatives from Switzerland pledged their full support and cooperation in the financial and banking sectors with Afghanistan's Central Bank (Da Afghanistan Bank).¹⁷
- In July 2023, Britain's charge d'affaires met with Afghanistan's minister of higher education about areas where the UK can cooperate and assist the ministry.¹⁸ British investors from different companies met with the Taliban's minister of mines and petroleum about investment opportunities

in June 2022 and September 2023, and a joint American-British company did so in November 2023.¹⁹

The Austrian far-right Freedom Party also met with Taliban officials in late September 2023, potentially exemplifying the horseshoe theory of extremism, given that the Austrian party does not want Afghan refugees residing in Austria, while the Islamic Emirate wants all Afghans to return home to build a true Islamic society.²⁰

Taliban engagement has expanded even further over the past two and a half years, likely due to attendance at multilateral forums, which also shows the leadership's greater integration into the international system and the various diplomatic venues where countries engage.²¹ So far, the Taliban's Islamic Emirate has attended these forums:

- **China.** Tunxi Neighboring Countries Meeting, China–South Asia Cooperation Forum, Trans-Himalayan Forum, China's Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation
- **Russia.** Kazan Forum, Astrakhan Forum
- **Qatar.** Qatar Economic Forum, Doha Forum
- **Turkey.** Antalya Diplomatic Forum
- **Uzbekistan.** Tashkent International Conference
- **Netherlands.** World Local Production Forum

The Taliban has also worked closely with both the Saudi Organization of Islamic Cooperation and Qatari Union of Muslim Scholars, illustrating its deepening ties with international Islamic entities. All of these different forums enabled the Islamic Emirate to cultivate relations with states that it may not have engaged with before while deepening relations with those it has already met with.

These engagements have led the Taliban's Islamic Emirate to devise its own forum that debuted in late January 2024, Afghanistan's Regional Cooperation Initiative, and includes China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. According to Taliban officials, "The meeting was mainly aimed at discussions and talks on establishing a region-centric narrative aimed at developing regional cooperation for a positive

and constructive engagement between Afghanistan and regional countries.”²² How the Taliban parlays this into something over time remains to be seen, but it shows that the Islamic Emirate is at the very least trying to appear as a normal government that acts in accordance with international norms and operates similarly to other countries.

UNEVEN SUCCESSES

The Taliban’s various diplomatic efforts have led to more countries reopening their embassies in Kabul, while also allowing the Islamic Emirate to have varying presences at embassies and diplomatic missions abroad, however unevenly thus far. Specifically, as of February 22, 2024, eighteen countries/entities have reopened their embassies in Kabul since the Taliban takeover: Azerbaijan, China, the European Union, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, and Uzbekistan. China remains the only country to have recognized the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as the legitimate successor to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2004–21) and the only country that has accredited a Taliban-appointed ambassador. That said, Taliban appointees for embassy charges d’affaires have been accredited by Iran, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Russia, and Turkmenistan. The Taliban’s Islamic Emirate has also been handed control of the embassies in Qatar and Malaysia, the missions in India, and the consulate-general in Dubai (UAE).

Despite the gap between countries willing to reopen embassies in Afghanistan versus those willing to grant the Taliban a diplomatic presence in their own territory, the overall trend is telling: the group is much less isolated than it was in the late 1990s, even if official recognition is not coming as quickly as the Taliban’s leaders would like.

RECOGNITION IS A FAIT ACCOMPLI

These and other developments indicate that the formal step of granting the Taliban *de jure* recognition is only a matter of time for some countries. At least a few such announcements can be expected in the near to medium term. Unlike

the first time the group was in power, it is now far more connected to the international system. Eighty countries have shown some level of engagement with Taliban authorities, and de facto recognition—acknowledging a new regime via noncommittal acts, without making it eligible for a seat at the United Nations—has become an accepted reality. Therefore, the Islamic Emirate's diplomatic efforts have allowed for a level of normalization within the international system even though it has yet to provide basic rights to women or to grapple with its past and current support for other jihadist actors internationally (al-Qaeda) or regionally (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan). Thus, while fighting may have helped the Islamic Emirate win its country back, diplomacy has allowed it to be an accepted international actor, even if it remains to be recognized officially.

NOTES

- 1 Aaron Y. Zelin, “Looking for Legitimacy: Taliban Diplomacy Since the Fall of Kabul,” PolicyWatch 3640, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 15, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/looking-legitimacy-taliban-diplomacy-fall-kabul>.
- 2 Heather Barr, “The Taliban and the Global Backlash Against Women’s Rights,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, February 6, 2024, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2024/02/06/the-taliban-and-the-global-backlash-against-womens-rights>.
- 3 Aaron Y. Zelin, “Turkey Calls for Recognition of the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate,” Policy Alert, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 17, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkey-calls-recognition-talibans-islamic-emirate>.
- 4 “Taliban Diplomacy,” database created by Aaron Y. Zelin, last accessed for this piece on February 22, 2024.
- 5 See <https://twitter.com/HafizZiaAhmad/status/1507012494363037701>.
- 6 “Taliban Diplomacy,” database, last accessed February 22, 2024.
- 7 “Taliban Diplomacy.”
- 8 Government of Norway, “Talks on Afghanistan in Oslo,” January 21, 2022, https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/talks_oslo/id2897938.
- 9 See Ministry of Mines & Petroleum–Afghanistan (@MoMPA Afghanistan), X/Twitter posts on March 16, 2022, 4:47 a.m., <https://twitter.com/MoMPAfghanistan/status/1504016429460434949>, and October 16, 2023, 6:08 a.m., <https://twitter.com/MoMPAfghanistan/status/1713859362953793543>.
- 10 See Ministry of Energy & Water–Afghanistan (@MEW_GOV_AF), X/Twitter post on May 2, 2023, 7:53 a.m., https://twitter.com/MEW_GOV_AF/status/1653367173773942784.
- 11 See Ministry of Mines & Petroleum–Afghanistan (@MoMPA Afghanistan), X/Twitter post on November 15, 2023, 10:11 a.m., <https://twitter.com/MoMPAfghanistan/status/1724807437478412721>, and Ministry of Energy & Water–Afghanistan (@MEW_GOV_AF), X/Twitter post on February 21, 2024, 6:05 a.m., https://twitter.com/MEW_GOV_AF/status/1760259556871917861.
- 12 See Ministry of Mines & Petroleum–Afghanistan (@MoMPA Afghanistan), X/Twitter post on September 21, 2023, 1:29 p.m., <https://twitter.com/MoMPAfghanistan/status/1704910733560152125>; Ministry of Agriculture–Afghanistan (@MAIL_AF), X/Twitter post on November 21, 2023, 12:17 a.m., https://twitter.com/MAIL_AF/status/1726832172286558416; MoPH (@MoPH_afg), X/Twitter post on December 16, 2023, 1:01 a.m., <https://twitter.com/MoPH55237794/status/1735902853758099898>; and Ministry of Economy–Afghanistan

- (@economy_af), X/Twitter post on December 16, 2023, 2:56 a.m., https://twitter.com/economy_af/status/1735931801837727817.
- 13 See Ministry of Economy–Afghanistan (@economy_af), X/Twitter post on September 19, 2023, 7:03 a.m., https://twitter.com/economy_af/status/1704088899155366175.
 - 14 See Ministry of Energy & Water–Afghanistan (@MEW_GOV_AF), “1-The head of the Kapisa Sub river basin met with the provincial official of the Norwegian Committee for Afghanistan (NAC). Kaveh Kharoosh, head of Kapisa Sub river basin, met with Norwegian Committee for Afghanistan (NAC) provincial responsible engineer Hasibullah Asadi and,” X/Twitter post on February 7, 2023, 2:22 a.m., https://twitter.com/MEW_GOV_AF/status/1622858268308566018.
 - 15 See Ministry of Energy & Water–Afghanistan (@MEW_GOV_AF), X/Twitter post on August 3, 2022, 4:17 a.m., https://twitter.com/MEW_GOV_AF/status/1554743307569340421.
 - 16 See Ministry of Economy–Afghanistan (@economy_af), X/Twitter post on January 10, 2023, 4:13 a.m., https://twitter.com/economy_af/status/1612739452023214080.
 - 17 See Da Afghanistan Bank–Afghanistan (@AFGCentralBank), X/Twitter post on March 29, 2022, <https://twitter.com/AFGCentralbank/status/1508773930517078021>.
 - 18 Previously available at <https://twitter.com/afmohe/status/1676635607894818821>.
 - 19 See Ministry of Mines & Petroleum–Afghanistan (@MoMPAfghanistan), X/Twitter posts on June 5, 2022, 6:10 a.m., <https://twitter.com/MoMPAfghanistan/status/1533390836465078273>; September 13, 2023, 10:41 a.m., <https://twitter.com/MoMPAfghanistan/status/1701969336028496211>; and November 30, 2023, 8:20 a.m., <https://twitter.com/MoMPAfghanistan/status/1730215200144719976>.
 - 20 See post on Twitter by Hafiz Zia Ahmad (@HafizZiaAhmad), September 24, 2023, 11:07 a.m., <https://twitter.com/HafizZiaAhmad1/status/1705962042664874061>.
 - 21 “Taliban Diplomacy” database, last accessed February 22, 2024.
 - 22 See post on Twitter by Hafiz Zia Ahmad (@HafizZiaAhmad), January 29, 2024, 7:12 a.m., <https://twitter.com/HafizZiaAhmad/status/1751941324083765681>.