



## OPINION OTHER VOICES

### DAESH a shared enemy

# Mistrust, but Afghan Shiites seek Taliban protection

Outside a Shiite shrine in Kabul, four armed Taliban fighters stood guard as worshippers filed in for Friday prayers. Alongside them was a guard from Afghanistan's mainly Shiite Hazara minority, an automatic rifle slung over his shoulder.

It was a sign of the strange, new relationship brought by the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August. The Taliban, Sunni hard-liners who for decades targeted the Hazaras as heretics, are now their only protection against a more brutal enemy: the Islamic State group.

Sohrab, the Hazara guard at the Abul Fazl al-Abbas Shrine, told The Associated Press that he gets along fine with the Taliban guards. "They even pray in the mosque sometimes," he said, giving only his first name for security reasons.

Not everyone feels so comfortable.

Syed Aqil, a Hazara visiting the shrine with his wife and 8-month-old daughter, was disturbed that many Taliban still wear their traditional garb - the look of a jihadi insurgent - rather than a police uniform.

"We can't even tell if they are Taliban or Daesh," he said, using the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State group.

Since seizing power, the Taliban have presented themselves as more moderate, compared with their first rule in the 1990s when they violently repressed the Hazaras and other ethnic groups. Courting international recognition, they vow to protect the Hazaras as a show of their acceptance of the country's minorities.

But many Hazaras still deeply distrust the insurgents-turned-rulers, who are overwhelmingly ethnic Pashtu, and are convinced they will never accept them as equals in Afghanistan. Hazara community leaders say they have met repeatedly with Taliban leadership, asking to take part in the government, only to be shunned. Hazaras complain individual fight-

ers discriminate against them and fear it's only a matter of time before the Taliban revert to repression.

"In comparison to their previous rule, the Taliban are a little better," said Mohammed Jawad Gawhari, a Hazara cleric who runs an organization helping the poor.

"The problem is that there is not a single law. Every individual Taliban is their own law right now," he said. "So people live in fear of them."

Some changes from the previous era of Taliban rule are clear. After their takeover, the Taliban allowed Shiites to perform their religious ceremonies, including the annual Ashura procession.

The Taliban initially confiscated weapons that Hazaras had used to guard some of their own mosques in Kabul. But after devastating IS bombings of Shiite mosques in Kandahar and Kunduz provinces in October, the Taliban returned the weapons in most cases, Gawhari and other community leaders said. The Taliban also provide their own fighters as guards for some mosques during Friday prayers.

"We are providing a safe and secure environment for everyone, especially the Hazaras," said Taliban government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid. "They should be in Afghanistan. Leaving the country is not good for anyone."

The Hazaras' turn to Taliban protection shows how terrified the community is of the Islamic State group, which they say aims to exterminate them. In past years, IS has attacked the Hazaras more ruthlessly than the Taliban ever did, unleashing bombings against Hazara schools, hospitals and mosques, killing hundreds.

IS is also the Taliban's enemy, frequently attacking Taliban forces.

In Dashti Barchi, the sprawling district of west Kabul dominated by Hazaras, many were skeptical the Taliban will ever change.

Marzieh Mohammadi, whose husband was killed five years ago in fighting with the Taliban, said she's afraid every time she sees them patrolling.

"How can they protect us? We can't trust them. We feel like they are Daesh," she said.

The differences are partly religious. But Hazaras, who make up an estimated 10% of Afghanistan's population of nearly 40 million, are also ethnically distinct and speak a variant of Farsi rather than Pashtu. They have a long history of being oppressed by the Pashtu majority, some of whom stereotype them as intruders.

Aqil said that when he tried to go to a police station for a document, the Taliban guard only spoke Pashtu and impatiently slammed the gates in his face. He had to come back later with a Pashtu-speaking colleague.

"This sort of situation makes me lose hope in the future," he said. "They don't know us. They are not broadminded to accept other communities. They act as if they are the owners of this country."

Frictions in the Hazaras' central Afghanistan heartland have raised concerns. In Daikundi province, Taliban fighters killed 11 Hazara soldiers and two civilians, including a teenage girl, in August, according to Amnesty International. Taliban officials also expelled Hazara families from several Daikundi villages after accusing them of living on land that didn't belong to them.

After an uproar from Hazaras, further expulsions were halted, Gawhari and other community leaders said.

The international community is pressing the Taliban to form a government that reflects Afghanistan's ethnic, religious and political spectrum, including women. The Taliban's Cabinet is comprised entirely of men from their own ranks. (AP)



The stepmother of Mohammed, 4 years old, who is malnourished, holds his legs in the Indira Gandhi hospital in Kabul, Afghanistan on Nov 8, 2021. The number of people living in Afghanistan in near-famine conditions has risen to 8.7 million according to the World Food Program. Inset: Mohammed lays on a hospital bed. (AP)

### Emaciated children point to rising hunger

# Bread in green tea ... to stop the crying

In Kabul's main children's hospital, 2½-year-old Guldana is sitting up in her bed, but she's too exhausted to even open her eyes. Her tiny body is wrapped in a blanket, only her emaciated face showing.

She's one of a growing number of near-starving children who are brought every day to the Indira Gandhi Children's Hospital in the Afghan capital. Hunger is increasing dramatically in Afghanistan, fueled by an economic crisis that has only gotten worse since the Taliban seized power in the country nearly three months ago.

Guldana's father, Jinnat Gul, said he can hardly afford to feed her and his other five children. He used to work going house to house collecting scrap goods and selling them. But for the past three months, work has dried up and he has hardly made any money.

"Before, I had enough work, I could provide food. We could have meat one or two times a week," he said. Now his family mainly gets by on boiled potatoes. He said sometimes he only has bread soaked in green tea for his children, "just to give them something so they stop crying."

The U.N.'s World Food Program said Monday that the number of people on the edge of famine has risen to 45 million in 43 countries. The number is up from 42 million earlier this year.

Afghanistan is the source of most of that increase. The number of Afghans living in near-famine conditions has risen to 8.7 million, up by 3 million from earlier this year, the WFP said. Overall, almost 24 million people in Afghanistan, or 60% of the population, suffer from acute hunger. An estimated 3.2 million children under age 5 are expected to suffer from acute malnutrition by the end of the year.

"It's a crisis. It's a catastrophe," WFP Executive Director David Beasley said during a weekend visit to Afghanistan. The WFP is rushing in supplies to feed people as the harsh winter sets in, but it says it needs some \$220 million a month in 2022 to fund its effort.

A severe drought this year in Afghanistan is one cause for increasing malnutrition. But also, more and more people simply don't have money to buy food.

The country's economy had been rapidly declining under the previous US-backed government, which struggled to pay salaries to its employees.

Now the economy is in full-fledged meltdown after the Taliban seized power on Aug. 15. The Taliban government is mired in financial crisis, scrambling for cash. The U.S. and other Western countries have cut off direct financial assistance to the government that covered most of its budget; also, the Taliban government cannot access billions of dollars in Afghan national reserves held abroad. As a result, millions of Afghans have not received salaries for months.

Worsening the situation, hundreds of local health facilities around the country have had to scale back services or shut down completely because of the lack of international funding. That means families with children suffering from malnutrition have to go farther to get care - or get none at all.

The Indira Gandhi Children's Hospital had to expand its space dedicated to malnutrition cases from one room to three, said one doctor there, Salahuddin Salah. At least 25 children brought to the hospital over the past two months have died, he said. Most staff at the hospital, from doctors and

nurses to cleaning staff, have not received their salaries in three months.

When The Associated Press visited the hospital, there were 18 children in the malnutrition ward. The ward gets around 30 new cases a week, said Zia Mohammed, assistant director for nursing. "Since two and three months, our malnourished patients have increased day by day," he said.

In one bed, a 4-month-old boy named Mohammed was extremely emaciated, and the flesh was shriveled on his tiny limbs. His skin was so thin that the veins showed through on his forehead like a map of tiny blue lines.

Mohammed was born a month prematurely, and his mother died from complications in the birth. "She bled to death because we had no money to take her to the hospital," said Rahila, the second wife of Mohammed's father, who brought the baby to the hospital.

The father was in the military of the ousted government and so hasn't had an income since the Taliban takeover, Rahila said. They tried giving Mohammed milk bought from the market, but he got diarrhea from it, so they have mainly fed him tea-soaked bread, she said.

Jinnat Gul, Guldana's father, said he brought his daughter to Kabul a week ago from his home village, Shahr-e Now, in Baghlan Province, north of Kabul, after a hospital in the provincial capital said it didn't have supplies to treat her.

He said Guldana is not the only child suffering back home. "There's a lot of sick children in the village," he said, "but there's no doctor to say if it's malnutrition or not." (AP)

editor's choice

