

The Taliban's Amir on the "Victory" in Afghanistan

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ON FRIDAY, JULY 1, 2022, MULLAH HAIBATULLAH AKHUNDZADA, the notoriously reclusive supreme leader of the Afghan Taliban, made an unprecedented appearance at a three-day gathering in Kabul. The gathering, which commenced on Thursday, June 30, 2022, was attended by some three to four thousand *ulema* (religious scholars), tribal elders, and Afghan so-called *mujahedeen* (holy fighters.)¹ The male-only gathering, which was held, ironically, at Kabul's Polytechnic University, aimed to formalize the Taliban's recapture of Afghanistan and the reins of government. The appearance of Akhundzada was noteworthy because he had not previously been filmed or photographed in public since the Taliban's seizure of Kabul in August 2021. In fact, he has no digital footprint and rarely leaves Kandahar, which is considered the spiritual and political home of the Taliban movement.² During the event, Akhundzada gave an hour-long *khutba* or religious sermon that was broadcast on Afghan radio.

Prior to Akhundzada's arrival at the dais, a Dari song was played. The lyrics to the song were:

*Afghanistan, my beloved country.
I sacrifice myself for you.*

*Of the entire world, you are my beautiful garden.
You are my everything.
You have been harmed so many times by infidels and devils—
Until you got your freedom.
My soil, Afghanistan. You are precious.
You will stay like this forever.
Afghanistan, my beloved country.*

When the song ended, an announcer declared Allah's greatness (*Allah-u-Akbar*) and, speaking in Pashto, described Afghanistan as the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" and introduced Akhundzada as the Honorable Amir-ul-Momineen, or "Commander of the Faithful."

Akhundzada started his address using a mixture of Arabic and Pashto. He began with the traditional greeting of *As-Salaam-Alaikum* (Peace Be Upon You), recited several Quranic verses, and offered *salat* (blessings) to the Prophet Muhammad. He also greeted the Taliban leaders in attendance, which included deputy Taliban chief and acting Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani (a designated terrorist by the U.S. Government and the United Nations Security Council), as well as key tribal elders, *ulema*, *mujahideen*, and others. After this, he began his speech.

There are several noteworthy things about Akhundzada's speech. For one, he did not refer to the meeting as a "*jirga*," which is a traditional Afghan reference for such a gathering. Instead, he referred to it as a "great gathering of *ulema*." His use of this term and his address to religious scholars was significant as it reflects the fact that the Taliban emerged from the Deobandi religious schools or *madaris*³ of Pakistan in the early 1990s while Afghanistan was being ravaged by ethnic militias associated with Hekmatyar Gulbuddin, on the one hand, and Ahmad Shah Masoud, on the other. In speaking directly to religious scholars, Akhundzada wanted to remind his audience that unlike the aforementioned ethno-nationalist warlords (*jangbaazi*) that fought over the remains of war-torn Afghanistan after the Soviet Union departed, the Taliban fundamentally comprise a religious movement, one that emerged from the crucible of those Pakistani Deobandi *madaris* along the Afghan border which took in young, male Pashtun refugees from Kandahar. The Taliban leadership today draws heavily from *ulema* who were educated in those Deobandi *madaris*. In principle, this religious rather than ethnic mooring opens up the movement to non-Pashtun Afghans, despite the movement's largely Gilzai Pashtun base.⁴ In this sense, the Taliban *amir* may be trying to convince his audience that post-America Afghanistan need not fall prey to ethnic warfare and other centripetal forces as it did after the Soviets withdrew.

Akhundzada went on to assert the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan is not only a source of pride for Afghans, but also for the global community of Muslims (*ummah*). He recognized the loss of life of all Afghans—whether *mujahideen* or civilians—and claimed to have prayed that Allah may accept their prayers and grant them admission to paradise. He acknowledged the killings and destruction of property that occurred in the course of the Taliban's "*jihad*" to reconquer Afghanistan but argued that it was done for a good cause, namely, fighting the non-believers and establishing an Islamic Emirate. He also claimed that Afghans are now happy with this outcome, despite evidence to the contrary. Notably, women and religious and ethnic minorities deeply fear for their lives and safety under Taliban rule, and these fears have been reinforced by ongoing Taliban violence and oppression of the same.⁵

Akhundzada contrasted the Taliban—a movement, he asserted, which sought only to establish security and a Sharia-based state in Afghanistan—with the country's previous U.S.-backed democratic regimes, which he denounced, arguing that they sought to enrich themselves to the alienation of ordinary Afghans. He also recast the objectives of foreign forces that had been fighting in Afghanistan for some two decades. He disputed the claims made by most foreign capitals which characterized their activities in Afghanistan variously as nation building, state building, human development, assisting the elected Afghan governments, and providing security assistance and training. Rubbishing these claims, Akhundzada asserted instead that foreign countries were fighting the Islamic faith itself as well as the practice of both Islam and *jihad*. He warned those in attendance that they must remain vigilant because the conflict between Muslims and non-believers will perdure forever.

Consequently, he maintained that international aid could never bring development or security to Afghanistan, and, in fact, such aid undermined both. Instead of seeking foreign assistance, he called for Afghans to come together for the economic development of the country. To assuage the fears of those in exile, he promised that they can return safely without fear of retribution provided that they do not seek to undermine the writ of the Taliban. He professed his belief that Afghans in exile will never receive the honor they deserve. They can have that honor only in Afghanistan, where they are needed. While attempting to mollify the fears of overseas Afghans, he sternly cautioned that returnees will face consequences if they challenge the Taliban regime and its objectives.

In a swipe at western democracies decrying the Taliban's oppression of women and girls and raising concerns about the equal rights and security of ethnic and religious minorities, Akhundzada told the *ulema* in attendance that leaders of

Islamic countries know this is not true. After all, he alleged, leaders of Islamic countries understand that everyone's rights will be respected in an Islamic regime that implements religious law. As is well known, many Muslim countries do not offer equal rights to women and religious minorities, and traditional Islamic jurisprudence does not recognize that all persons have equal rights. And where Islam does accord rights—such as the right of girls to study—the Taliban have a poor track record of respecting those rights. Akhundzada declared that the establishment of Sharia cannot be done by the Taliban alone; rather, doing so will require the efforts of a diverse set of stakeholders such as the *ulema* and other religious leaders as well as tribal leaders.

He also took a veiled jab at Pakistan when he opined that “other countries” do not want an independent Afghanistan and have also intervened in Afghan internal affairs. He declared that now is the time for the Taliban to take complete control of the country's interests. This reflected significant differences among the various factions within the Taliban movement as well as among Afghans themselves about the desired role of Pakistan in Afghan domestic affairs. Many understand and resent the fact that Pakistan's assistance to the Taliban has always been instrumental to Pakistan's own strategy of having a favorable regime in Kabul that will service the interests of Pakistan's military and the intelligence agency it runs, the ISI. Many Afghans and the Taliban in particular want to be independent of Pakistan's manipulative ruses. Indeed, deep differences about the kind of relationship the Taliban should have with Pakistan is one of the most divisive issues which explain the various Taliban factions. Pakistan is so worried about the loyalty of their once-prized proxies that it is reportedly supporting rival—and even more extreme—Islamist militant groups to check the Taliban's grasp on the country.⁶

The Taliban *amir* concluded his speech with a call for unity for the sake of Afghanistan's development and security. Given the unique nature of Akhundzada's speech a year after the fall of the country to the Taliban, it is worth translating it in its entirety here.

Akhundzada's Khutbah at the Great Gathering

BEFORE EVERYTHING ELSE, I WOULD LIKE TO CONGRATULATE YOU all on the Mujahideen victory with which Allah has blessed the people of Afghanistan and all the Muslims around the world.

Whoever sacrificed their lives, whether *mujahideen* or civilians, to secure this victory, I pray that Allah accepts their martyrdom and rewards them with *Jannatul-Firdous* (Garden of Paradise). I also express my gratitude to those who aided the *mujahideen* during these last 20 years of *jihad* and contributed to this victory in one or the other way.

The entire country is now secured, and we thank Allah for this blessing. Afghanistan's victorious *jihad* is not only a source of pride for Afghans but also for the world's umma (Muslim community). During the first days of the month of Ramadan, many Muslim leaders from around the world offered me their Ramadan greetings.⁷ This clearly demonstrates that the Muslim world is overjoyed about our victory in which Allah helped us establish an Islamic regime in Afghanistan. They are all aware of Islamic rules and regulations and they know that in Islam everyone's rights are to be respected and that people will live in welfare, prosperity, and safety.

In Islam, one's faith is complete if one refrains from committing verbal and physical harm to another Muslim. Islam has taught us not to harass or subdue someone or robbing them of their property or honor. We are committed to that. During *jihad*, killings happen, and cities are destroyed. While many suffer because of it, it is all for a good cause. Our *jihad* and the victory we achieved in it established an Islamic regime in the country. The people are very happy now. We fought for this and in all our discussions during the Peace Talks, we were adamant that all we want is to have a pure Islamic regime where Sharia Law is implemented fully. Now, we have achieved our objective.

Politics in other governments are similar to this: one party is in power while the opposition party comes up with various strategies with which they can gather the support of the people in an effort to win them over. Once the opposition is in power, it continues working for their interests to gain more power and emoluments while scarcely caring about the Muslim community. However, we are committed to fulfilling our promises and it is time that we implement all of them in practice. As we promised, by establishing an Islamic

regime there will be security, and enforcement of Sharia Law. Thus, we need to prepare for this. Doing so is no longer the sole task of the Taliban or *mujahideen* but rather the task of religious scholars and tribal leaders who also need to work to bring Sharia into force.⁸

Security means that one can practice Islamic principles freely. All of the obstacles that hinder the implementation of Islamic law must be lifted. Twenty years ago, those who were talking about Islam and *Sharia* law were arrested and tortured. Now, our *jihad* resulted in the dominance of *Sharia* law in the country, the removal of obstacles, and receptiveness to propagate and follow Islam.

Infidels and foreigners were not fighting us for territory or money. They were fighting against our faith and beliefs to stop the practice of Islam and *jihad*. This fighting is still not over and will continue until the end of times. I will not let the disbelievers implement their rules on us. They try to prevent us from implementing our Islamic *Sharia*. This opposition will go on and, even if I am no longer here, someone else will stand against them and continue the legacy. We have not done any kind of consultations with them and will never do so in future.

There has been no settlement or agreement between Muslims and disbelievers who are fighting over imposing their sets of beliefs on the Muslim community and restricting Islamic practices. [He continued in a lengthy disposition in Arabic, citing various Quranic verses before reverting to Pashto.] Believing in Islam and fighting for it come with a lot of struggles and difficulties because these infidels will not let us practice our religion. Therefore, we need to oppose them and be prepared to fight them. We are proud that we defeated a great power, and that they ran away from here. During the peace talks in Qatar, it was agreed that the American forces will leave the country based upon some conditions. However, my concern was that even if they do leave, we will need to fight with the rest of those who will oppose us and instigate the people against us. Another civil war would break out and many people could be killed. We thank Allah that none of that happened, and that we solved the problem well before the troops left the country.

Killing Afghan Muslims was never our purpose. If they suffered in our operations, it was because of the *jihad* against the infidels such that we could establish a secure environment for Afghans. If these Afghans were standing against us in this fighting in support of disbelievers or making themselves a human shield for the disbelievers, we had to confront them. The main goal of our *jihad* has been the process of implementing Islamic rule while we secure the country. An Islamic regime has been established in all the [country's] institutions and many people in leadership positions are religious scholars who are working to eliminate corruption and patronage. The hunger for power and money in the previous government caused popular displeasure at their unchecked pursuit of self-interest.

Taliban waged *jihad*, sacrificed themselves, fought against infidels and were victorious. The Taliban do not know how to apply Sharia but the *ulema* know how. You all should obey them in this regard. Now, the entire Muslim community wants to seek Islamic guidance from us. Afghanistan's *ulema* not only makes an Islamic regime successful but will also assume a leadership role for the global Muslim community.

Jihad can take different forms in an Islamic regime. For example, the executive branch should enforce Sharia Law in every area of the country and ordinary people should obey and implement those rules in their daily lives. Judges in the courts should also take just decisions based on Islamic principles. No sentences or punishments shall be executed outside of the court's order. Those who are coming in the way of our *tablighat* (proselytization) process and opposing our principles will be dealt with accordingly.

While I do not have much knowledge of governance, we should govern ourselves rather than let others govern us. Other countries do not want us to be independent and have always intervened in our internal matters. Now is the time for us to take complete control. We do not want to live according to others' expectations nor will we deal with them even if they use an atomic bomb on us. They cannot defeat us. Even if they kill us all, we will get the title of

martyr and that will be the biggest achievement. Economic development is related to security. We will not rely on international aid as it does not give us any kind of prosperity, nor does it build our economy. We need to come together and unite. Local investors and businessmen should come and invest in their country. You should not wait for infidels to build our infrastructure or to invest here.⁹

Those who are out of Afghanistan and spreading propaganda against us should know that the fighting has ended. Do not try to start another war as the people are not in favor of your agendas. You and your family will not get any respect or honor while staying in an infidel territory. Return to your own country. We will not interrogate you or hold you accountable for your past actions. However, you are not allowed to oppose the government or undermine our common welfare. If you do so, you all will be punished. We have forgiven those who fought against us, killed, and wounded our soldiers. In the same way, we will forgive others as well.¹⁰ We do not have any bad intentions toward our neighbors also; we only want peace, security, and an Islamic regime. We do not obey anyone's commands, nor do we fulfil their demands as Afghanistan is an independent country under the Taliban government.

We must end the divisions that exist and work for unity. Infidels do not recognize us as legitimate rulers because they do not want us to have an Islamic regime. But this gathering is a clear indication that we have the support of the people and they have accepted us to rule over them.

Conclusion

PERHAPS THE MOST NOTEWORTHY THING ABOUT THIS SPEECH IS THAT AKHUNDZADA gave it at all. Domestic and foreign audiences alike will recognize that many of his claims and assurances are misleading if not outright false. Despite promises to not exact revenge on Afghans who worked for the previous governments and/or who aided the U.S. and foreign militaries and civilian organizations in the country, the

Taliban continues to engage in punitive campaigns and killings. Despite his assertions that Muslims all over the world congratulated the Taliban, not a single Muslim-majority country has recognized the regime. In fact, only leaders of the world's most notorious Islamist terrorist organizations—various branches of *Al Qaeda*, Islamic State and Hamas—have done so. Most importantly, Akhundzada didn't offer any meaningful clues about how the Taliban would actually govern or even find resources to sustain the country economically. And Afghans surely know that the Taliban have done little to forge unity inside the war-wary and war-weary country. After all, the Taliban has been unable to resolve the differences among the various factions of the Taliban, and it offers few prospects for forging unity within Afghanistan's diverse polity.

NOTES

1. Charlotte Greenfield and Mohammad Yunus Yawar, "Taliban leader hails Afghan victory at gathering to forge national unity," *Reuters.com*, July 1, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/talibans-reclusive-supreme-leader-attends-gathering-kabul-state-media-2022-07-01/>; "Afghan Clerics' Assembly Urges Recognition of Taliban Govt," *VOA News*, July 2, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghan-clerics-assembly-urges-recognition-of-taliban-govt/6642706.html>.
2. "Taliban supreme leader addresses major gathering in Kabul," *Al Jazeera*, July 1, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/1/taliban-supreme-leader-addresses-gathering>.
3. Plural of *madrassah*, religious seminaries.
4. While Pakistan's intelligence agency did not create the movement, it did help propel them to power by taking on those very predatory *jangbaazi*. This history is necessarily concise. For more detailed information, see *inter alia* Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "Understanding the Taliban and insurgency in Afghanistan." *Orbis* 51, no. 1 (2007): 71-89; Barnett R. Rubin, "Afghanistan under the Taliban." *Current History* 98, no. 625 (1999): 79; Dietrich Reetz, "The Deoband Universe: What makes a transcultural and transnational educational movement of Islam?" *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 1 (2007): 139-159; Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, oil and the new great game in Central Asia* (London: IB Tauris, 2002).
5. U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2022 Annual Report—Afghanistan Chapter, June 2022.

<https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-04/2022%20Afghanistan.pdf>;
Human Rights Watch, “Afghanistan: Taliban Deprive Women of Livelihoods, Identity,”
January 18, 2022,

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/18/afghanistan-taliban-deprive-women-livelihoods-identity>; United Nations Security Council, “Amid Plummeting Humanitarian Conditions in Afghanistan, Women, Girls ‘Are Being Written Out of Society’ by De Facto Authorities, Briefers Warn Security Council,” June 23, 2022,

<https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14946.doc.htm>; Abubakar Siddique, “Taliban Atrocities Reported In Crackdown On Rebel Hazara Commander,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 01, 2022, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-crackdown-atrocities-mujahid/31923580.html>; Daa Hadid and Fazalminallah Qazizai, “A year on, the Taliban savor victory, while other Afghans pay the price,” *NPR.org*, August 15, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/15/1117451810/taliban-afghanistan-one-year-anniversary>.

6. On the various factions among the Taliban, see Shahmahmood Miakhel, “For the Taliban, Governing Will Be the Hard Part,” *Afghan Issues Paper United States Institute of Peace*, October 2021, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Afghan-Issues-Paper_For-Taliban-Governing-Will-Be-Hard-Part.pdf; Lynn O’Donnell, “Taliban Splintered by Internal Divisions, External Spoilers,” *Foreign Policy*, November 12, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/12/taliban-afghanistan-pakistan-factions-fighting-division-unity/>; Abubakar Siddique, “‘Unprecedented Differences’: Rifts Within The Taliban Come Out In The Open,” *Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty*, June 2, 2022, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-rifts-exposed-afghanistan/31880018.html>; Abdul Basit, “How smouldering discontent affects the Taliban rule in Afghanistan,” *TRT*, August 2, 2022, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/how-smouldering-discontent-affects-the-taliban-rule-in-afghanistan-59456>.

7. Note that the Taliban’s government has yet to be recognized by any Muslim-majority country and many clerics within and outside of Afghanistan have decried their policies thus far. Emma Graham-Harrison, “It’s our system,” *The Guardian*, July 1, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/01/taliban-leader-hits-out-foreign-demands-afghan-government>. Also, note that Akhundzada did not specify which leaders congratulated him; however, news reports indicate that Hamas, **Al Qaeda** and its regional affiliates, the Islamic State, among others, did so. See for example, Crisis Group, “How Islamist Militants Elsewhere View the Taliban’s Victory in Afghanistan,” October 27, 2001, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/how-islamist-militants-elsewhere-view-talibans-victory-afghanistan>; Caleb Weiss, “Ansaru congratulates the Taliban in Afghanistan, promotes **Al Qaeda** ties,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, December 20, 2021, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2021/12/ansaru-congratulates-the-taliban-in-afghanistan-promotes-al-qaeda-ties.php>;

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8. In this statement, Akhundzada revealed that the Taliban do not know how to implement Sharia. However, because the ulema do, Afghans must listen to them and follow their diktats.
 9. There is an expectation among the Taliban that China will be a source of financial aid and investment. There are considerable reasons to be dubious that China will be able to do so. See variously Samya Kullab, "China Eyes Investment in Afghanistan's Mes Aynak Mines," *The Diplomat*, March 28, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/china-eyes-investment-in-afghanistans-mes-aynak-mines/>; Samya Kullab, "With Eye to China Investment, Taliban Now Preserve Buddhas," *Bloomberg News*, July 3, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-27/with-eye-to-china-investment-taliban-now-preserve-buddhas>; Eltaf Najafizada, "Chinese Miners in Talks to Access Vast Afghan Lithium Reserves," *Bloomberg News*, November 24, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-24/chinese-firms-show-interest-in-afghanistan-s-mineral-reserves>; Iain Marlow and Enda Curran, "China Eyes Afghanistan's \$1 Trillion of Minerals With Risky Bet on Taliban," *Bloomberg News*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-08-24/china-s-eyes-1-trillion-of-minerals-with-risky-bet-on-taliban>; Ruth Pollard, "Is China About to Tuck Afghanistan Under Its Belt and Road?," *Bloomberg News*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-08-17/china-isn-t-about-to-tuck-afghanistan-under-its-belt-and-road>.
 10. This claim is belied by the massive and deadly campaign of reprisals against those who worked with the previously elected government as well as the United States, NATO and other non-NATO allies who worked in Afghanistan. See Barbara Marcolini, Sanjar Sohail and Alexander Stockton, "The Taliban Promised Them Amnesty. Then They Executed Them," *The New York Times*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/04/12/opinion/taliban-afghanistan-revenge.html>; Michaela Cavanagh, Uta Steinwehr, Jan D. Walter, Ahmad Hakimi, "Fact check: Have the Taliban kept their promises?," *DW.com*, August 11, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-have-the-taliban-kept-their-promises/a-62649985>; Amnesty International, "Afghanistan: The Rule of Taliban: A year of violence, impunity and false promises," August 15, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa11/5914/2022/en/>.