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TALIBAN'S "CONTACT COMMISSION": THREE YEARS LATER

Over three years ago, on 16 March 2022, the Taliban interim cabinet announced the formation of a commission called *Ertibatat Ba Shaksyat Hai Afghan Wa Awdat Anan*.¹ It has been tentatively and variously translated into English as Commission for Contact/Liaison/Communication with Afghan Personalities/Leaders and their Return/Repatriation to the country. It is often referred to as the Contact Commission or Liaison Commission in short (hereafter, the Contact Commission). The Contact Commission was formally launched two months later on 21 May 2022, with a mandate to open channels of communication with former Afghan political figures and senior government officials who left the country as the Taliban swept to power, and facilitate their safe return as well as safe stay in the country. The commission is supposed to work within the framework of the nationwide 'general amnesty' announced by the Taliban for former government officials, including members of the former Afghan armed forces, immediately after taking over capital Kabul in mid-August 2021.²

¹ "Cabinet Approves Formation of Commission for Liaison and Repatriation of Afghan Personalities", Al Emarah, 16 March 2022, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/cabinet-approves-formation-of-commission-for-liaison-and-repatriation-of-afghan-personalities/> (Accessed 9 May 2023); "Commission Formed to Facilitate Return of Political Leaders", *Tolo News*, 17 March 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-177149> (Accessed 20 March 2022).

² "Taliban Announces 'Amnesty,' Reaches Out to Women", *Al Jazeera*, 17 August 2021, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/taliban-announces-amnesty-urges-women-to-join-government> (Accessed 14 May 2025); "Transcript of Taliban's First News Conference in Kabul", *Al Jazeera*, 17 August 2021, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/taliban-announces-amnesty-urges-women-to-join-government> (Accessed 22 August 2021); Ali M. Laitifi, "All Afghans' Should Feel Safe Under Taliban, Says Security Chief", *Al Jazeera*, 22 August 2021, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/22/all-afghans-should-feel-safe-under-taliban-says-security-chief> (Accessed 21 July 2024).

The commission claims to have facilitated the return of more than 1,000 members associated with the previous Afghan regime, including a few women members, over the past three years.³ The commission also claims to have issued immunity cards (often also referred to as the security card) to those who have returned through its mediation and facilitation, which is supposed to serve as an assurance and a guarantee against any arbitrary detention and legal prosecution on the basis of past actions and associations.

The Contact Commission, which works under the supervision of the Taliban's Political Commission, is apparently a part of the Taliban's overall scheme of things to project its 'emirate' as a conciliatory, inclusive and legitimate state entity with a growing appeal. It represents Taliban's pushback against the criticism of its regime for lacking domestic legitimacy and social inclusivity in its power structures. It is noteworthy that the Taliban until taking over power often stated that their objective is not to seek the monopoly of power but to establish an inclusive Islamic system in the country.⁴ However, despite several senior and veteran Taliban leaders serving on the commission, it has thus far failed for various reasons to negotiate the return of any significant opposition leader or political group from exile, which raises fundamental questions about the credibility and

³ Hijratullah Kakar, "1,044 Afghan Personalities Return From Abroad in 3 Years", *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 3 February 2025, at <https://pajhwok.com/2025/02/03/1044-afghan-personalities-return-from-abroad-in-3-years/> (Accessed 16 March 2025).

⁴ Thomas Ruttig, "'I, Mulla Omar': Two Takes on the Taleban Leader's Eid Message", Afghanistan Analysts Network, 10 August 2013, at <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/i-mulla-omar-reading-the-taleban-leaders-eid-message/> (Accessed 8 September 2018); "Message of Felicitation of Amir-ul-Momineen, Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada on the Eve of Eid-ul-fitr", Al Emarah, 2 July 2016, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/message-of-felicitations-of-amir-ul-momineen-sheikh-haibatullah-akhundzada-on-the-eve-of-eid-ul-fitr/> (Accessed 4 July 2023); "Clear Policy of the Islamic Emirate", Al Emarah, 1 February 2017, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/clear-policy-of-the-islamic-emirate/> (Accessed 4 February 2024); Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, "How Can We Have a Stable, Strong and Prosperous Afghanistan?", Al Emarah,

effectiveness of the commission as well as the 'general amnesty' announced by the Taliban. Looking beyond the optics, the occasional paper assesses the effectiveness of the Taliban's Contact Commission, or the lack thereof, three years since its formal launch.

COMPOSITION OF CONTACT COMMISSION

The all-Taliban Contact Commission has seven regular members and is headed by veteran Taliban leader Shahabuddin Delawar, who was the acting minister of mines and petroleum until July 2024. Although Delawar has since been relegated to the position of acting president of the Afghan Red Crescent Society, he continues to head the commission. The other six members of the commission are: Amir Khan Muttaqi, the acting minister of foreign affairs; Khairullah Khairkhwa, the acting minister of information and culture; Mohammad Khalid Hanafi, the acting minister of propagation of virtue and prevention of vice; Abdul Haq Wasiq, the acting head of the Taliban intelligence agency, the General Directorate of Intelligence; Fasihuddin Fitrat, the acting chief of staff of the Taliban armed forces; and Mohammad Anas Haqqani, the youngest brother of the acting interior minister and 'Khalifa' of the Haqqani Network, Sirajuddin Haqqani. He is also the youngest member of the commission. The presence of Khairkhwa and Wasiq is significant also due to their long standing ties with Iran where a large number of former Afghan civil and particularly military and intelligence personnel had taken refuge.

At least five of the seven members of the commission are Pashtun Taliban from southern and eastern parts of the country. Khalid Hanafi is a Pashai (often referred to as a Pashtun in some sources) from Nuristan and

20 June 2021, at <https://alemarahenglish.net/?p=47146> (Accessed 23 July 2021); "Message of Felicitation of the Esteemed Amir-ul-Mumineen Sheikh-ul-Hadith Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada (HA) on the Occasion of Eid-ul-Adha", Al Emarah, 18 July 2021, at <https://alemarahenglish.net/?p=47783> (Accessed 18 July 2021).

Fasihuddin Fitrat is a Tajik from Badakhshan and the only one from north Afghanistan in the commission. Except for three members, Khalid Hanafi, Fasihuddin Fitrat and Anas Haqqani, the other four are veterans from the first Taliban regime that ruled from Kabul from September 1996 to November 2001. Four of the seven regular members of the commission are under the United Nations (UN) Sanctions List, which includes Shahabuddin Delawar (TAi.113; listed on 23 February 2001), Amir Khan Muttaqi (TAi.026; listed on 25 January 2001), Khairullah Khairkhwa (TAi.093; listed on 25 January 2001), and Abdul Haq Wasiq (TAi.082; listed on 31 January 2001).⁵ All four are also designated under the sanctions lists of the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU).⁶

On 7 March 2023, the EU, in addition to the abovementioned four members, listed Mohammad Khalid Hanafi, who heads the notorious Taliban ministry for the propagation of virtue and the prevention of vice, under its Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime for committing “serious human rights violations in Afghanistan, in particular the widespread violation of women’s rights, such as their freedom of expression, as well as the right to equal treatment between men and women.” Hanafi was designated along with the acting Taliban minister of higher education, Neda

⁵ “1988 Sanctions List”, United Nations Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1988 (2011), Last Updated 30 January 2019, at <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/sanctions/1988/materials> (Accessed 24 March 2025).

⁶ “Consolidated List of Financial Sanctions Targets in the UK”, Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation, HM Treasury, UK Government, Last Updated 25 February 2022, at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1057454/Afghanistan.pdf (Accessed 24 March 2025); “Council Regulation (EU) No 753/2011 of 1 August 2011 Concerning Restrictive Measures Directed Against Certain Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities in View of the Situation in Afghanistan”, Document 32011R0753, EUR-Lex, European Union, Current Consolidated Version: 13 September 2024, at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2011/753/oj> (Accessed 24 March 2025).

Mohammad Nadeem, in the EU sanctions list.⁷ Nine months later, on 8 December 2023, the US Department of the Treasury too added Khalid Hanafi, along with the acting president of Afghanistan Academy of Sciences, Fariduddin Mahmood, to its specially designated nationals and blocked persons list for “serious human rights abuse related to the repression of women and girls, including through the restriction of access to secondary education for women and girls in Afghanistan solely on the basis of gender.”⁸ Perhaps, Fasihuddin Fitrat and Anas Haqqani are the only two members in the seven-member commission who are not designated under the UN or any other sanctions list.

At least three of the seven members of the commission are former Guantanamo Bay or Bagram detainees: Khairullah Khairkhwa, Abdul Haq Wasiq, and Anas Haqqani. Both Khairkhwa and Wasiq were released along with three other Taliban members, together known as the ‘Taliban Five’ or ‘Gitmo Five,’ in June 2014 in exchange for US Army Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl who was reportedly in the custody of the Haqqani Network

⁷ Council of the European Union, “Council Implementing Regulation (EU) 2023/500 of 7 March 2023 Implementing Regulation (EU) 2020/1998 Concerning Restrictive Measures Against Serious Human Rights Violations and Abuses”, *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 069I, Vol. 66, 7 March 2023, at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32023R0500> (Accessed 1 April 2025); “Violence Against Women and Girls: EU Sanctions Nine Individuals and Three Entities Under its Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime”, Council of the European Union, Press Release, 7 March 2023, at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/03/07/violence-against-women-and-girls-eu-sanctions-nine-individuals-and-three-entities-under-its-global-human-rights-sanctions-regime/> (Accessed 31 March 2025).

⁸ “Treasury Designates Perpetrators of Human Rights Abuse and Commemorates the 75th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”, Office of Foreign Assets Control, US Department of the Treasury, Press Release, 8 December 2023, at <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1972> (Accessed 31 March 2025).

since mid-2009. Anas Haqqani was held at the Bagram detention facility for five years before being released along with two senior members of the Haqqani Network in November 2019. All three Haqqani members were released in exchange for two foreign professors of the American University of Afghanistan in Kabul, American Kevin C. King and Australian Timothy J. Weeks, who were held by the Haqqani Network since August 2016.

The commission has a secretariat and an official spokesperson. Mawlawi Zakirullah Zakir is the head of the secretariat and Mawlawi Ahmadullah Wasiq is the official spokesperson of the commission. Zakirullah Zakir, a Pashtun, is the director general (often also referred to as the chief of staff) of the office of the acting deputy prime minister for political affairs. The commission, which is a part of the Political Commission, had been working until December 2024 under the overall supervision of Mawlawi Abdul Kabir, who was the acting deputy prime minister for political affairs and head of the Political Commission. In January 2025, Kabir, a veteran Taliban leader from the 1990s, was relegated to a ministerial position following the death of Khalil-ur Rehman Haqqani, the acting minister of refugees and repatriation affairs and the uncle of Sirajuddin Haqqani, in a suicide attack at his ministry compound in Kabul in December 2024. The Taliban leadership is unlikely to announce Kabir's replacement as there are reports suggesting the abolishment of the post of deputy prime minister for political affairs by the Taliban supreme leader or the *Amir-ul-Mumineen* (the commander and leader of the 'faithful'), Hibatullah Akhundzada.⁹ The downgrading of the position of two key senior leaders associated with the commission—Shahabuddin Delawar, the commission's chairman, and Abdul Kabir, who supervised the overall functioning of the commission—is bound to impact the profile of the Contact Commission.

⁹ "Taliban Abolishes Political Deputy PM Post, Dismisses over 250 Staff Members", *Afghanistan International*, 30 April 2025, at <https://www.afintl.com/en/202504303839> (Accessed 3 May 2025).

Commission's spokesperson Ahmadullah Wasiq, a Pashtun, and a former Bagram detainee like Anas Haqqani, was the deputy leader of the Taliban's Cultural Commission and the acting director general of the national broadcaster, *Radio Television of Afghanistan* (RTA), until he was reassigned in August 2023 as the acting director general of the directorate of physical education and sports and acting president of the National Olympic Committee of Afghanistan, which is not recognised by the International Olympic Committee.

The composition of the commission reflects the power balancing that the Taliban leadership has constantly struggled or juggled with internally over the past years, both before and after 2021. It explains the presence of senior members from key Taliban commissions. Besides the Political Commission, of which the Contact Commission is a part, other key Taliban commissions—Military Commission; Cultural Commission; Intelligence Commission; and the Commission for Invitation, Preaching and Recruitment—are well represented. Five of the seven commission members—Shahabuddin Delawar, Amir Khan Muttaqi, Khairullah Khairkhwa, Abdul Haq Wasiq, and Anas Haqqani, and also commission's spokesperson Ahmadullah Wasiq—have earlier served at the Taliban political office in Doha, Qatar. They have been members of one or the other Taliban negotiating teams that conducted talks with the American negotiators or the Afghan government-appointed negotiating teams in Doha. Muttaqi has been one of the key Taliban negotiators since the late 1990s. He was said to have played a key role in convincing some of the opponents to give up their resistance to the Taliban in the months leading to the collapse of the Ashraf Ghani Government in mid-2021.

CHARTER OF CONTACT COMMISSION

The commission was formally launched on 21 May 2022—two months after the interim cabinet announced its formation—with the release of a 15-point charter or bill laying down the basic tasks of the commission and its secretariat. The contact details of the commission were also released

on the occasion.¹⁰ According to the charter or the bill, posted by Taliban Deputy Spokesperson Inamullah Samangani the same day on his X platform, the commission is supposed to collect information about Afghan political and military figures who left the country, either before or after the Taliban takeover in August 2021, and facilitate their return based on assurances and guarantees provided under the ‘general amnesty’ announced by Taliban chief Akhundzada. Interestingly, the text of the ‘general amnesty’ has never been made public. The secretariat of the commission is supposed to prepare the list of exiled Afghan leaders and senior officials (male and female) and their whereabouts and forward it to the commission members for their consideration.¹¹

Those returning through the mediation of the commission are to be issued immunity or security cards as an assurance against any arbitrary detention or legal prosecution for past associations with the previous Afghan regime or the United States-led Western coalition. However, in case of any disputes at the local level, the returnee can approach the commission which after due consideration would forward the case to the relevant judicial authorities. Similarly, in cases where the security of the political or military figures returning through the commission is threatened, the commission is

¹⁰ “Commission for Liaison and Repatriation with Afghan Personalities Officially Started its Work”, Al Emarah, 21 May 2022, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/commission-for-liaison-and-repatriation-of-afghan-personalities-officially-started-its-work/> (Accessed 3 February 2025); “Delawar Called on All Afghan Political Figures to Return Home”, *Bakhtar News Agency*, 21 May 2022, at <https://www.bakhtarnews.af/en/iea-made-the-commission-of-contact-afghan-personalities-bill-public/> (Accessed 29 March 2025).

¹¹ Inamullah Samangani, Taliban Deputy Spokesperson and Director of Information and Culture Department of Kandahar, “روشک هېمان اندووع و ناغفا” [Bill on Contact Commission with Afghan Personalities and Their Return to the Country], X Post (formerly Twitter), 21 May 2022, 5:40 PM, at <https://x.com/HabibiSamangani/status/1527985135680991232> (Accessed 15 March 2025). In Persian.

supposed to arrange for their personal security. According to the commission's charter, the commission would extend similar privileges to the members of the previous regime who are within the country and have given up their opposition to the Taliban regime.¹²

Although the charter is completely silent about the prospects of integrating the returnee Afghan officials and personnel, including the military returnees, into the Taliban's political, administrative and military structures, it does state that the commission would facilitate work opportunities for the returnee professionals in the private sector and business opportunities for those seeking to invest in the country.¹³ In March 2023, some 10 months after the commission was formally launched, Ahmadullah Wasiq, the spokesperson of the commission, stated that the returnees with professional experience and expertise "may join certain areas of the government because hundreds of thousands of former government officials are currently included in the government."¹⁴

The 15-point charter or bill is evidently rudimentary with barely any defined objectives or a roadmap to engage the exiled Afghan political figures and opposition groups. It lacks both content and clarity and at best may be deemed as a draft in progress. It is also clear that the commission is neither intended nor empowered to enter into any structured dialogue with the exiled opposition political parties or groups. The focus is primarily on negotiating the return of individual political figures and officials from the previous regime and not on seeking political reconciliation with the opposition groups or co-opting the returnees into the Taliban political and military structures. Senior Taliban leader and Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar had early on ruled

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Nazir Shinwari, "'Talented' Ex-Officials Will be Given Jobs If They Return: Commission", *Tolo News*, 13 March 2023, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-182478> (Accessed 3 February 2024).

out the possibility of including former leaders and officials into the interim cabinet. Accusing them of “being corrupt,” he had reportedly stated: “These people cannot be with us in the government, because even if they are five (even if only five people are included), they will harm our government’s standing and we don’t want our government to be brought down by such people.”¹⁵ The limited scope and mandate of the Contact Commission should not come as a surprise in view of the Taliban’s strong aversion to co-opting the non-Taliban elements, including the non-Taliban Pashtuns, in its system.¹⁶

The so-called Charter lacks provision for confidence-building measures as well. A lot has been left for back channel negotiations. With the Taliban putting a ban on all political parties and activities and refusing to negotiate any power-sharing arrangement, the prospect of key opposition leaders, mainly ethnic non-Pashtun, returning to the country is largely ruled out. The exiled political figures cannot be expected to simply walk into uncertainty and nothingness. That leads to two key questions: who are those high ranking members of the former regime, or which section of the former regime, the Contact Commission claims to have returned to the country, and why have they returned or what have they returned to, when there is barely any provision or scope for integration into the Taliban-led system, and also when their children, particularly the daughters, have no avenues to pursue higher education or seek any professional career as the Taliban continue to ban girls from attending schools beyond primary level and women from having any public life. However, prior to moving ahead, it is essential to first consider those prominent Afghan figures that chose to stay in the country beyond August 2021.

¹⁵ “No Place for Ex-Officials in Cabinet: Mullah Baradar”, *Tolo News*, 4 January 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-176168> (Accessed 6 January 2022).

¹⁶ For a detailed analysis, see Vishal Chandra, “The Why and What of Non-Inclusivity and Dissensus in the Taliban ‘Emirate’”, MP-IDSA Special Feature, 4 November 2024, at <https://www.idsa.in/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/sf-vchandra-041124-1.pdf>.

WHO STAYED BACK AND WHY

Several senior political figures, mostly Pashtun though, decided to stay put even as the Taliban took over capital Kabul. It included former President Hamid Karzai, former Chairman of the Afghan High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR) and Chief Executive in the National Unity Government Abdullah Abdullah, former Deputy Chairman of HCNR Asadullah Saadati, former Chairman of *Mesbrano Jirga* (Senate or House of Elders) or the Upper House of the Afghan Parliament Fazal Hadi Muslimyar, Hezb-e Islami chief Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, Chieftain of Grand Kuchi Council and brother of former President Ghani Hashmat Ghani Ahmadzai, former Governor of Kandahar and Nangarhar and former Minister for Border and Tribal Affairs Gul Agha Sherzai (also known as Muhammad Sharif), former Kabul Mayor Mohammad Daoud Sultanzy, and several members of the parliament and provincial councils. The former finance minister and former ambassador to Pakistan and the president of Afghanistan Investment Support Agency, Omar Zakhilwal, had returned to Kabul within days of the Taliban takeover. He was also a member of the government-appointed negotiating team that held direct talks with senior Taliban negotiators in Doha.

Former Afghan leaders like Hamid Karzai, Abdullah Abdullah and Gulbuddin Hikmatyar could not have decided to stay back without having any prior understanding with the Haqqani Network or the Taliban or with the Pakistan military establishment. Perhaps, their decision to stay back was part of a political understanding at the broader regional level involving several regional countries, besides Pakistan that hosted and backed the Taliban for two decades, that had directly engaged the Taliban representatives based in Doha to establish an inclusive post-US and post-Ghani political order in Afghanistan. The backchannels had been at work as the Western military coalition rushed for an exit and the Haqqani and Taliban forces closed in on Kabul.

After Ghani and his cabinet fled the country in mid-August 2021, Karzai together with Abdullah Abdullah and Gulbuddin Hikmatyar had formed a coordination council to facilitate a peaceful transfer of power to a broad based transitional administration. The deceased senior Haqqani leader, Khalil-ur-Rehman Haqqani, had claimed that he was in contact with senior

officials of the Ghani Government and had assured them of their safety and security.¹⁷ Such backchannel contacts between Kabul and the Haqqani Network had been there for almost a decade. The meetings that the Haqqani and Taliban leaders held with Karzai, Abdullah and others in Kabul were widely publicised to project a conciliatory image of a new and different Taliban, different from the one that brutally tortured and killed former President Mohammad Najibullah and his brother in capital Kabul in September 1996. However, the whole idea of having some members of the former regime or non-Taliban figures in the Taliban-led interim government to secure early international recognition fell through due to severe differences on the issue within the Taliban.

The Taliban hardliners had been opposed to former Afghan leaders and political opposition groups having any public role in the ‘emirate.’ It must be mentioned that in November 2021, just three months after the Taliban takeover, Khalid Hanafi, who is a member of the Contact Commission, had openly referred to the former Afghan leaders who remained in the country, particularly Hamid Karzai, Abdullah Abdullah and Fazal Hadi Muslimyar, as “criminals.”¹⁸ Recently in April 2025, while addressing the government employees in Kabul, he also reportedly made offensive remarks

¹⁷ Ali M. Laitifi, “‘All Afghans’ Should Feel Safe Under Taliban, Says Security Chief”, *Al Jazeera*, 22 August 2021, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/22/all-afghans-should-feel-safe-under-taliban-says-security-chief> (Accessed 21 July 2024); Amin Kawa, “Khalil Haqqani’s Claims and Atta Muhammad Nur’s Response: Allegiance or Troubled Dreams?”, *Hasht-e-Subh*, 19 February 2024, at <https://8am.media/eng/khalil-haqqanis-claims-and-atta-muhammad-nurs-response-allegiance-or-troubled-dreams/> (Accessed 22 February 2024); “Afghan Minister Haqqani Reveals Taliban’s 2021 Offer of Resignation to Ousted President Ghani”, *Daryo.uz*, 16 February 2024, at <https://daryo.uz/en/2024/02/16/afghan-minister-haqqani-reveals-talibans-2021-offer-of-resignation-to-ousted-president-ghani> (Accessed 16 February 2024).

¹⁸ Giti Rahimi, “Official Sparks Reactions for Criticizing Former Leaders”, *Tolo News*, 17 November 2021, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-175501> (Accessed 19 November 2021).

against the non-Muslims.¹⁹ As someone known to make highly provocative and derogatory public statements in his ministerial capacity, Khalid Hanafi's presence in the commission is rather counter-productive.

Meanwhile, the Taliban sought to use the presence of former Afghan leaders particularly Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah in capital Kabul, who were later allowed to occasionally undertake foreign travels and meet foreign ambassadors and senior foreign officials visiting Kabul, to showcase the 'general amnesty' announced for members of the former regime and that it was safe for the exiled figures to return to the country. Abdullah's return to Kabul after over a 40-day long stay with his family in India on 11 June 2022 was publicised across the Taliban-run media with the Taliban officials warmly receiving him at the Kabul Airport.²⁰ During his stay in India, Abdullah had also met the then US Special Representative for Afghanistan, Thomas West, who was on a visit to New Delhi in late May 2022.²¹

¹⁹ Ahmad Azizi, "Taliban Minister Calls Non-Muslims 'Worse than Four-legged Animals'", *Amu TV*, 9 April 2025, at <https://amu.tv/167755/> (Accessed 12 April 2025); Fidel Rahmati, "Khalid Hanafi: Non-Muslims are 'Worse than Animals'", *The Khaama Press*, 10 April 2025, at <https://www.khaama.com/khalid-hanafi-non-muslims-are-worse-than-animals/> (Accessed 12 April 2025).

²⁰ "Abdullah Abdullah Leaves Afghanistan", *Tolo News*, 1 May 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-177827> (Accessed 11 June 2025); "Dr. Abdullah Ex-Chairman of National Reconciliation Return to the Country", *Bakhtar News Agency*, 11 June 2022, at <https://bakhtarnews.af/en/dr-abdullah-former-chairman-of-national-reconciliation-return-to-the-country/> (Accessed 9 May 2023); Mujeeb Rahman Awrang Stanikzai, "Abdullah Returns to Country After 43-Day Personal Visit to India", *Tolo News*, 11 June 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-178424> (Accessed 10 June 2025).

²¹ Rezaul H. Laskar, "US Special Representative for Afghanistan Meets Senior Indian Officials, Abdullah Abdullah", *Hindustan Times*, 27 May 2022, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/us-special-representative-for-afghanistan-meets-senior-indian-officials-abdullah-abdullah-101653591094513.html> (Accessed 11 June 2025); Saqalain Eqbal, "US Special Representative Thomas West Meets Dr. Abdullah Abdullah", *The Khaama Press*, 26 May 2022, at <https://www.khaama.com/us-special-representative-thomas-west-meets-dr-abdullah-abdullah37465/> (Accessed 11 June 2025).

Karzai's first foreign travel since the Taliban takeover came in early December 2022, when he visited the UAE en route to Germany and Türkiye. Interestingly, his three-day visit to the UAE, along with his former finance minister Omar Zakhilwal, coincided with the first official visit of Acting Taliban Defence Minister Mullah Yaqoob, who was accompanied by Anas Haqqani, and also the visit of US Special Representative Thomas West, to the UAE.²² During his over two weeks long multi-nation tour, Karzai was said to have met Thomas West and also former Afghan Vice President Ahmad Zia Massoud and former Governor of Balkh Province Atta Mohammad Noor in the UAE; former Minister of Justice Fazl Ahmad Manawi in Germany; and several exiled Afghan leaders including Abdul Rasool Sayyaf, Mohammad Mohaqiq, Karim Khalili and Abdul Rashid Dostum in Türkiye.²³

Both Karzai and Abdullah being politicians and not ethnic militia commanders or leaders of any ethnicity-based political groups are not seen as much of a threat by the Taliban. Both leaders may not have a defined ethno-political support base but they have the ability to work through various power networks, which makes them relatively well positioned, compared to exiled ethnic political leaders and militia commanders, to act as potential intermediaries and backchannel negotiators. However, for now, with none of the former Afghan political figures and

²² Mujeeb Rahman Awrang Stanikzai, "Karzai Leaves Kabul for UAE", *Tolo News*, 3 December 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-181026> (Accessed 16 June 2025); "Karzai Leaves for UAE Over a Year After Travel Ban by Taliban", *Amu TV*, 3 December 2022, at <https://amu.tv/26015/> (Accessed 15 June 2025).

²³ Saqalain Eqbal, "Former Afghan President and Former Minister of Justice Meet in Berlin", *The Khaama Press*, 17 December 2022, at <https://www.khaama.com/former-afghan-president-and-former-minister-of-justice-meet-in-berlin-46576/> (Accessed 16 June 2025); Banafsha Binesh, "Karzai Meets Exiled Politicians in Germany, Turkey", *Tolo News*, 19 December 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-181260> (Accessed 15 June 2025); "Afghanistan: Karzai Pitching National Dialogue to Exiled Politicians", *Amu TV*, 20 December 2022, at <https://amu.tv/28704/> (Accessed 16 June 2025).

senior officials based inside the country finding any place or role in the Taliban setup or having an active public life, their presence in Kabul barely seem to serve as an inspiration to the exiled Afghan leaders.

It is noteworthy that on 17 May 2022, just four days before the formal launch of the Contact Commission on 21 May, former Afghan vice president and the leader of predominantly ethnic Uzbek Junbish-e-Milli, Abdul Rashid Dostum, hosted a meeting that was attended by a large number of exiled political figures or their representatives in Ankara to discuss the future course of political and military action in Afghanistan. A key outcome of the meeting was the formation of the Supreme Council of National Resistance for the Salvation of Afghanistan, generally referred to as the National Resistance Council (NRC) in short. Several rounds of meeting have since been held but key constituents of the NRC have yet to forge a unified approach towards the Taliban-led Afghanistan.²⁴

A year later in August 2023, the Taliban-led Ministry of Justice formally banned all the political parties registered with the former ministry of justice and imposed severe restrictions on political activism of any kind,²⁵ effectively leaving no scope for reconciliation with the political opposition whether based inside or outside the country. The Taliban interim government has since imposed several restrictions on Hikmatyar and Hezb-e-Islami

²⁴ Saqalain Eqbal, "Ankara Gathering of Political Figures Forms the Supreme Council of National Resistance for the Salvation of Afghanistan", *The Khaama Press*, 19 May 2022, at <https://www.khaama.com/ankara-gathering-of-political-figures-forms-the-supreme-council-of-national-resistance-for-the-salvation-of-afghanistan68391/> (Accessed 21 May 2025); "Afghan Political Leaders Meet in Turkey", *Tolo News*, 19 May 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan-178080> (Accessed 21 May 2022); Mohammad Farshad Daryosh, "Statement Released from Afghan Politicians at Turkey Meeting", *Tolo News*, 19 May 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-178087> (Accessed 21 May 2022).

²⁵ Fidel Rahmati, "Taliban Declare Ban on All Political Parties in Afghanistan", *The Khaama Press*, 16 August 2023, at <https://www.khaama.com/taliban-declare-ban-on-all-political-parties-in-afghanistan/> (Accessed 17 August 2023).

members based in Kabul.²⁶ Taliban's failure to meaningfully engage the former political leaders based inside the country only added to the long held mistrust of the Taliban regime and its strong monopolistic tendencies, making it difficult for the Contact Commission to negotiate the return of exiled political figures. With the Taliban regime having nothing to offer to the exiled Afghan leaders, except perhaps a politically dumb and non-active stay in the country, the commission clearly had notably limited scope and mandate for political outreach. That to an extent explains the slowdown in the voluntary arrival of high ranking former officials and the commission's increased focus on bringing back Afghan technocrats, businessmen, traders and investors to help revive the national economy. However, the commission does not seem to have had much success in attracting them either.

One also finds the commission presenting the deportation or forced return of hundreds of mid to low ranking former civil and particularly security and intelligence officials to the country, whether due to changes in host country's policy towards foreign migrants, refugees and asylum seekers or due to the pressure brought upon by the Taliban intelligence on family members of the exiled officials left behind in Afghanistan, as an outcome of its mediation and facilitation.

It is also important to note that a large number of civil personnel from the previous regime, including women personnel, mostly serving in middle and low level positions in ministries and government departments, and in provincial and district administrations, remained in the country even as the government collapsed and the Taliban took over. They never had the

²⁶ Fidel Rahmati, "Taliban Orders Hizb-e-Islami Leader to Vacate Home and Office", *The Khaama Press*, 25 March 2024, at <https://www.khaama.com/taliban-orders-hizb-e-islami-leader-to-vacate-home-and-office/> (Accessed 26 March 2024); Fidel Rahmati, "Habib Rahman Hekmatyar: Taliban Closes Barya TV Over Ideological Differences", *The Khaama Press*, 17 April 2024, at <https://www.khaama.com/habib-rahman-hekmatyar-taliban-shuts-down-barya-tv-for-disagreeing-with-talibanism/> (Accessed 19 April 2024).

means and the option to leave the country. Taliban Foreign Minister Muttaqi in his interaction at the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies in Doha, held on 11 October 2021, had for the first time claimed that about 500,000 civil servants—male and female—from the previous government had resumed their work and that none have been removed.²⁷ Muttaqi has since reiterated the same figure several times, particularly when addressing the foreign audience.²⁸ However, an article published in the *Foreign Policy* magazine in February 2022 stated a much lower figure, citing a Taliban source. To quote from the article: “of the 455,000 total civil servants, more than 98 percent remained in Afghanistan, including at least two deputies at the Ministry of Finance, two at the Ministry of Transport and Aviation, and one in Kabul’s municipal government.”²⁹

The Taliban claim that there are women serving in their administrative structures. In November 2023, the interior ministry spokesperson stated that about 2,000 women personnel were working in various departments

²⁷ “Event Report: A Conversation between Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, Acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan, and Professor Sultan Barakat, Founding Director of CHS”, Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies, Doha, 14 October 2021, p. 3, at <https://chs-doha.org/en/Events/Documents/Mawlawi%20Muttaqi%20-%20Post%20Event%20Report%20final.pdf> (Accessed 21 April 2025).

²⁸ “Speech by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, His Excellency Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi in Islamabad”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Afghanistan, 11 November 2021, at <https://mfa.gov.af/en/5650> (Accessed 20 April 2025); “Speech by Afghan Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi at OIC Foreign Ministers Meeting in Islamabad”, Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 19 December 2021, at <https://mfa.gov.af/en/7872> (Accessed 22 April 2024); Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, “Afghanistan is Ready to Work with the US, But Sanctions Must Go”, Opinion, *Al Jazeera*, 23 March 2023, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/3/23/afghanistan-is-ready-to-work-with-the-us-but-sanctions-must-go> (Accessed 10 May 2024).

²⁹ Stefanie Gliniski, “I Wanted to Stay for My People”, *Foreign Policy*, 9 February 2022, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/09/afghanistan-civil-servants-stay-taliban/> (Accessed 10 December 2022).

of the ministry, particularly the General Directorate of Passports and Directorate of Public Services. The spokesperson further stated that some women personnel were deployed at security checkpoints and also worked with the night operations division of the ministry.³⁰ The ministry had first set up a 100-member women police unit in the latter half of 2022 to manage women demonstrators and protestors.³¹ Later in May 2024, Acting Deputy Prime Minister for Political Affairs Abdul Kabir reportedly claimed in his meeting with UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo in Kabul that about 85,000 women were working in various government departments.³² It is difficult to verify these figures in the absence of credible and independent sources of information.

The Taliban leadership further point to the ethnic and regional diversity of the retained civil personnel to showcase inclusivity in their government. However, since they are mostly serving at middle and low level positions, the Taliban's claim about having an inclusive government are met with scepticism and criticism both inside and outside the country. Even though the Contact Commission is an exercise in political outreach to the exiled Afghan figures, it does not have a single non-Taliban member or any representation from the previous regime. Nevertheless, due to various factors discussed below, several hundred former civil and military personnel have returned to the country.

WHO RETURNED

The decision to form the Contact Commission was preceded by numerous calls by the Taliban interim government for educated Afghans and technically

³⁰ "MoI: Nearly 2,000 Women Work in Ministry", *Tolo News*, 15 November 2023, at <https://tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan-186048> (Accessed 16 November 2023).

³¹ "IEA Establishes Female Police Unit", *Ariana News*, 1 November 2022, at <https://www.ariananews.af/iea-establishes-female-police-unit/> (Accessed 23 April 2025).

³² "Taliban Hopes Stance on Doha Meeting Accepted", *Amu TV*, 20 May 2024, at <https://amu.tv/98682/> (Accessed 27 May 2025).

qualified workforce to return to the country. The Taliban leaders project their full territorial control over the country and its borders as an opportunity not just for the regional countries to invest in the country, but also for the Afghan professionals and investors to return and help rebuild state capacities and revive national economy.³³ Unlike the Akhundzada-led ultraconservative cliché in Kandahar, which has barely shown any understanding of State and international affairs, a section of the political leadership in Kabul, due to external exposure and better situational awareness, has apparently been conscious of the various complex policy formulation and implementation challenges—administrative, financial, and economic—that lay ahead in delivering basic services to the people and reviving the national economy in a sustained manner.

Just days before the formal launch of the Contact Commission on 21 May 2022, Anas Haqqani claimed that about 50 former government officials had returned to the country. He however did not provide any details about them.³⁴ Even prior to it, there were reports about members

³³ "Head of New Afghan Government Calls on Ex-officials to Return", *Al Jazeera*, 8 September 2021, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/8/acting-afghan-pm-calls-on-former-officials-to-return-al-jazeera> (Accessed 27 April 2025); "Declaration of Ministry of Higher Education", *Bakhtar News Agency*, 10 February 2022, at <https://www.bakhtarnews.af/en/declaration-of-ministry-of-higher-education/> (Accessed 30 March 2025); "Deputy PM Meets with Afghan Elites", *Al Emarah*, 21 March 2022, at <https://www.bakhtarnews.af/en/deputy-pm-meets-with-afghan-elites/> (Accessed 30 March 2025); "Many Afghan Personalities Returned Back Home", *Bakhtar News Agency*, 5 June 2022, at <https://www.bakhtarnews.af/en/many-afghan-personalities-returned-back-home/> (Accessed 29 March 2025); "IEA Highly Regards Potentiality of Each Individual", *Al Emarah*, 7 December 2022, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/iea-highly-regards-potentiality-of-each-individual/> (Accessed 23 March 2025); "Realistic Opportunity for All Afghan [sic] to Work Together for Development of the Country", *Al Emarah*, 12 December 2022, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/a-realistic-opportunity-for-all-afghan-to-work-for-development-of-the-country/> (Accessed 23 March 2025).

³⁴ Shirshah Rasooli, "Nearly 50 Former Govt Officials Returned": Anas Haqqani", *Tolo News*, 12 May 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-177980> (Accessed 28 May 2024).

of the previous government returning to the country. Former President Ghani's Special Representative and Minister of State for Peace Abdul Salam Rahimi and some former Afghan Air Force pilots had reportedly returned in February and March 2022.³⁵ In late February, the former woman mayor of Maidan Shahr, the capital of central Maidan Wardak Province, Zarifa Ghafari, had returned to Afghanistan from Germany but was said to have left the country two weeks later.³⁶ She reportedly stated in early March that the Taliban are "capable of changing" but soon after leaving the country referred to the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan as "a prison for women."³⁷

Of particular note was the 'return' of Sultan Masood Dakik, an Afghan-German entrepreneur and a self-described 'State Development Specialist,'

³⁵ "Senior Officials of the IEA Welcome Arrival of Former's [sic] Regime [sic] Minister of Peace to Kabul", Al Emarah, 12 February 2022, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/senior-officials-of-the-ica-welcome-arrival-of-formers-regime-minister-of-peace-to-kabul/> (Accessed 22 April 2024); "5 Afghan Pilots Returns [sic] Home", Al Emarah, 6 February 2022, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/5-afghan-pilots-returns-home/> (Accessed 22 April 2024); "Air Force Pilot Returned Back to Home", Al Emarah, 26 March 2022, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/air-force-pilot-returned-back-to-home/> (Accessed 23 April 2024).

³⁶ "Former Mayor Zarifa Ghafari Returns to Afghanistan", *Tolo News*, 27 February 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-176905> (Accessed 2 May 2025); Frogh Tareen, "I Found Myself Again on Return to Kabul: Zarifa Ghafari", *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 28 February 2022, at <https://pajhwok.com/2022/02/28/i-found-myself-again-when-returned-to-kabul-zarifa-ghafari/> (Accessed 2 May 2025).

³⁷ "Former Mayor's Return to Kabul Sparks Controversy", *Voice of America*, 10 March 2022, at <https://www.voanews.com/a/former-mayor-s-return-to-kabul-sparks-controversy/6479705.html> (Accessed 2 May 2025); Akmal Dawi, "Taliban Welcome, Others Criticize Return of Former Afghan Officials", *Voice of America*, 8 June 2022, at <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-welcome-others-criticize-return-of-former-afghan-officials/6609042.html> (Accessed 2 May 2025).

after 37 years.³⁸ Given his professional profile and also apparently due to his distinguished lineage, several senior Taliban ministers, including Abdul Ghani Baradar and Abdul Kabir, engaged him and sought German and European aid and investments for Afghanistan. Dakik also reportedly offered to act as a bridge between the EU and the Taliban regime.³⁹

Commission's spokesperson Ahmadullah Wasiq while speaking to the official *Bakhtar News Agency* in Herat in October 2022 stated that the commission has invited all exiled political and military figures, except former President Ghani, and also the journalists to return to the country. He also informed that the commission had approached Mohammad Ismail Khan, the former governor of western Herat Province and a prominent anti-Taliban commander, several times but he refused to return.⁴⁰

It is noteworthy that the Taliban had earlier provided Ismail Khan a safe passage to Iran after the fall of Herat on 13 August 2021. Five months later, Acting Foreign Minister Muttaqi claimed to have met both Ismail Khan and Ahmad Massoud, the leader of the anti-Taliban National

³⁸ "Afghan Development Expert Returns Home After 37 Years in Exile", Al Emarah, 7 March 2022, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/afghan-development-expert-returns-home-after-37-years-in-exile/> (Accessed 25 March 2025). Also see, Sultan Masood Dakik's Biography, at <https://www.sultan-masood-dakik.com/biography/> (Accessed 13 May 2025).

³⁹ Abdul Raqeeb Sail and Ismat Khawrin, "Dakik, Govt High-Ups Talk Execution of Development Projects", *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 9 March 2022, at <https://pajhwok.com/2022/03/09/dakik-govt-high-ups-talk-execution-of-development-projects/> (Accessed 22 April 2025); Abdul Raqeeb Sail and Ismat Khawrin, "Daqiq: Trying to Set up Company That Benefits Baitul Mall", *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 15 March 2022, at <https://pajhwok.com/2022/03/15/daqiq-trying-to-set-up-company-that-benefits-baitul-mall/> (Accessed 22 April 2025).

⁴⁰ "370 Afghan Personalities So Far Returned Back to Country", Al Emarah, 22 October 2022, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/370-afghan-personalities-returned-back-to-country/> (Accessed 9 May 2023).

Resistance Front and son of late Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, on the sidelines of his first official visit to Iran in early January 2022. Muttaqi was said to have urged both the leaders to return to the country.⁴¹ It was also reported at the time that Muttaqi appointed Abdul Qayyum Sulaimani, a nephew of Ismail Khan, as the head of Afghan Embassy in Tehran. Sulaimani until then served as the deputy ambassador and was appointed by the previous government.⁴² Similarly, Acting Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani while addressing a gathering in central Bamyan Province in September 2023 had reportedly urged ethnic Hazara leaders Mohammad Mohaqqiq and Karim Khalili to return to the country.⁴³ Interestingly in early December 2022, Mutasim Agha Jan, who served as the finance minister in the first Taliban regime and was a member of the Quetta *Shura*, had returned to Kabul along with Acting Taliban Defence Minister Mullah Yaqoob, who along with Anas Haqqani was on an official visit to the UAE.

A perusal of the statements issued from time to time by the Contact Commission gives an idea about the pace at which the members of the

⁴¹ “Taliban Confirms Foreign Minister Met Rebel Leader In Tehran”, *Afghanistan International*, 10 January 2022, at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202201101906> (Accessed 8 June 2025); “Muttaqi Meets Ismail Khan, Ahmad Massoud in Tehran”, *Tolo News*, 10 January 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-176246> (Accessed 8 June 2025).

⁴² Giuliano Bifulchi, “Taliban Reported a Meeting With Ahmad Massoud and Ismail Khan in Tehran”, *The Special Eurasia*, 10 January 2022, at <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2022/01/10/taliban-ahmad-massoud-tehran/> (Accessed 8 June 2025); Syed Zafar Mehdi, “Taliban Delegation Meets Afghan Opposition Figures in Iran”, *Anadolu Agency*, 10 January 2022, at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/taliban-delegation-meets-afghan-opposition-figures-in-iran/2470116> (Accessed 8 June 2025).

⁴³ Naweed Samadi, “Haqqani Asks Mohaqqiq, Khalili to Return to Afghanistan”, *Tolo News*, 8 September 2023, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-185013> (Accessed 10 September 2023).

previous Afghan regime were said to have returned from exile over the past three years (see Table 1 below).

Table 1
**Number of Returnees Associated with
the Previous Afghan Regime**

(As claimed and stated by the Contact Commission from time to time)

Approx. Number of Returnees	As of Date
100	14 June 2022
130	22 August 2022
300	12 September 2022
370	22 October 2022
471	16 January 2023
491	13 February 2023
513	13 March 2023
520	30 June 2023
605	16 July 2023
692	30 January 2024
711	6 March 2024
839	24 April 2024
992	15 October 2024
1,008	8 November 2024
1,045	2 February 2025

Sources: Compiled by the author based on figures stated by the Contact Commission and quoted primarily in the Taliban and Afghan sources, including the official *Bakhtar News Agency*, Al Emarah, X (formerly twitter) platform of the Contact Commission, and leading Afghan news agencies based in the country.

In order to have an idea about the profile of the returnees from the previous Afghan regime that the Contact Commission claims to have returned over the past three years, the names of the returnees and the positions they previously held have been listed in the tables below. The tables are intended to reflect the composition of the returnees and not to provide an exhaustive list of the returnees. The names of the returnees are listed in the order in which the Contact Commission reported their return since June 2022. The names of two notable women returnees have been listed in bold letters. In cases where the year of the returnee’s arrival in the country is not clear, the names have been added at the end of the relevant tables. The country of exile/refuge of the returnees has been mentioned only where it was stated or reported by the Contact Commission or leading Afghan sources.

Table 2.1

Returnee Former Afghan Ministers, Members of Parliament and Provincial Councils, and Senior Administrative Officials

Name of the Returnee	Key Position(s) Previously Held	Country of Exile/Refuge
2022 (June Onward)		
Said Intizar Khadim	Former Director General for Peace, Refugees and Prisons’ Affairs at the Office of the National Security Council of Afghanistan; Strategic Communications Advisor, Afghan High Peace Council; and former Director, Strategic Communications, Independent Directorate of Local Governance.	UAE
Hussni Mubarak Azizi	Former Acting Minister and Deputy Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation; Director of Education Department, Ghazni Province; and Director for School Affairs and Programmes, Technical and Vocational Education and Training Authority of Afghanistan.	Türkiye
Amanullah Ghalib <i>(British citizen)</i>	Former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of <i>Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat</i> (DABS), the National Power Utility of Afghanistan; Director of Renewable Energy and Deputy Minister of Energy, Ministry of Renewable Energy and Water. A British national, Ghalib has been the Director of Land Bridge Technical Support Limited in the UK since January 2022.	UK

Ghulam Farooq Wardak (<i>Hezb-e Islami</i>)	Former Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs and Minister of Education. Earlier headed the secretariats of the Constitutional Commission, Joint Electoral Management Body, Council of Ministers, and the Peace <i>Jirga</i> . He also headed the Office of Administrative Affairs of the Minister for Parliamentary Affairs. Prior to 2001, he worked with the UN Development Programme and the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA).	Türkiye
Mohammad Sediq Chakari (<i>Jamiat-e Islami; dual Afghan and British citizenship</i>)	Briefly served as Minister of Hajj and Awqaf in President Karzai's cabinet. Earlier served as the Minister of Tribal Affairs and Minister of Information and Culture in President Rabbani's cabinet in the 1990s.	UK
Abdul Hakim Noorzai	Former Deputy Director of Internal Audit in the Office of the National Security Council, and the leader of <i>Da Afghanistan Da Milli Wabdat Wolessi Tahreek</i> or the People's Movement of the National Unity of Afghanistan. He has also been associated with the Danish Refugee Council's Danish Demining Group as its chief of operations in Afghanistan.	--
Eng Amirzai Sangin (<i>Swedish citizen</i>)	Former Minister of Communications and Information Technology and former CEO of state-owned Afghan Telecom. Prior to 2001, he was associated with the Swedish Telia International (founder member), Swedish Telecom, and was an active member of the SCA. He studied and taught at the Telecommunications Training Centre in Kabul, and later headed it in the 1970s. He is also the founder & CEO of the Sangin Technology Services (SanTech) located in Kabul.	Sweden
Abdul Wasay Tokhi/Tawhidi	Former Advisor to the Afghan High Council for National Reconciliation.	--
Hidayat Amin Arsala (<i>founder member Mahaz-e-Melli of Pir Sayed Ahmad Gailani; pro-royalist Rome Group</i>)	Former Senior Minister and Minister of Commerce and Industry in President Karzai's first cabinet; Vice President in the Karzai-led Afghan Transitional Authority; Vice Chairman and Finance Minister in the Karzai-led Afghan Interim Administration; and Foreign Minister in President Burhanuddin Rabbani's government in the 1990s.	United States (US)
Muhammad Asif Nang	Former Provincial Governor of Laghman and Farah; Deputy Minister of Technical Education and Acting Minister of Education; Spokesperson, Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs and Ministry of Education; and former Editor of the government-run <i>Peace Jirga</i> magazine.	--

Makhdom Mohibullah Furqani (<i>Jumbish-e Milli</i>)	Former MP in <i>Wolesi Jirga</i> (House of Representatives or House of People) from Samangan Province and former District Governor of Dar-e-Suf in Samangan Province.	--
Eng Hamidullah Yalani	Former Director General, Afghanistan Urban Water Supply and Sewerage Corporation, Kabul.	--
Hasibullah Kalimzai	Former MP from Maidan Wardak and Second Deputy Speaker of <i>Meshrano Jirga</i> (Senate or House of Elders).	--
Amir Khan Yar	Former MP from Nangarhar Province and First Deputy Speaker of <i>Wolesi Jirga</i> .	--
Mohammad Tayyab Atta	Former MP in <i>Meshrano Jirga</i> from Kunar Province.	--
Kuchi Zazai	Former Director, Education Department, Paktia Province.	--
Yar Mohammad Hussainkhel	Former Director General, Special Prosecution Attorney for Counter-Narcotics.	--
Zabit Amir Mohammad	Former Member of the Nangarhar Provincial Council.	--
Hakim Munib	Former Acting Minister of Hajj and Awqaf.	--
Abdul Aleem Ayyar	Former Director of Education Department, Kapisa Province.	--
TORPEKAI RASOOLI	Former Member of Kunar Provincial Council. She is married to former Deputy Minister of Education Mohammad Sediq Patman.	--
Mohammad Dawood Ghafari (<i>Jamiat-e Islami</i>)	Former MP in <i>Meshrano Jirga</i> from Ghor Province and former Member of Ghor Provincial Council.	--
Kamal Nasir Osuli	Former MP in <i>Wolesi Jirga</i> from Khost Province.	--
Kafil Reyhan	Former Chairman of Khost Provincial Council.	--
Kamil Bek Hussaini	Former MP in <i>Meshrano Jirga</i> from Badakhshan Province.	--
Payanda Mohammad	Former MP in <i>Wolesi Jirga</i> from Sar-e-Pul Province.	--
Mohibullah Bandari/Dawlati (<i>Jumbish-e Milli</i>)	Former Member of the Faryab Provincial Council.	--
Abdul Bashir Hakimi	Former Deputy Minister of Finance, Administration and Tourism, Ministry of Information and Culture.	--

Toryalai Wesa (<i>Canadian citizen; originally from Kandahar</i>)	Former Governor of Kandahar; known to have had close ties with former President Karzai and his family. Mukhtar Rashidi, former Adviser to President Karzai, is said to be a relative of Wesa. Rashidi returned to Afghanistan later in 2023.	Canada
Abdul Mobin Faqirzada	Former Chairman of the Paktika Provincial Council.	US
Hussain Hussaini	Former Chief of Staff and Advisor on Political and International Relations to former Second Vice President Sarwar Danesh.	--
Abdul Wudud Paiman	Former MP in <i>Wolesi Jirga</i> from Kunduz Province. He was considered close to former Minister of Economy and former Acting Minister of Finance Abdul Hadi Arghandiwal, who led a moderate political faction of the Hezb-e-Islami.	--
Mohammad Daud Gulzar	Former Advisor to President Ghani. A Hotak Pashtun, he previously headed the High Peace Provincial Council in Zabul Province.	--
Mohammad Sardar Timory	Director of Prisons in Faryab Province.	Uzbekistan
Shamsuddin Sarhadi	Former Spokesperson of the Ministry of Refugees and former District Governor of Doshi and Dahana-e-Ghori in Baghlan Province.	--
Nizam Khpalwak	Former Spokesperson of the National Water Affairs Regulation Authority of Afghanistan.	Türkiye
Najibullah Nasir	Former MP from Kabul and Second Deputy Speaker of <i>Wolesi Jirga</i> ; and former Member of the Nimroz Provincial Council.	--
Baz Mohammad Nasir	Former Chairman of the Nimroz Provincial Council.	UAE
2023		
Faqir Mohammad Qaisar	Former Member of the Faryab Provincial Council.	Iran
Maj Gen Gul Nabi Ahmadzai	Former Governor of Paktia Province; Commander of the Kabul Garrison; Commander of 505 Spin Ghar Police Zone; and former Director of Education, Ministry of Interior.	Türkiye
Sadiq Mangal	Former Advisor to President Ghani.	Saudi Arabia
Eng Wali Mohammad Ortaq	Former Provincial Director of DABS in Faryab.	Iran

Abdul Rahim	Former District Governor of Bilchiragh in Faryab Province.	Iran
Abdul Aziz Babakarkhail	Former CEO of the Bank-e-Millie Afghan and former CEO and President of the <i>Pashtany</i> Bank.	Norway
Munawar Shah Bahaduri	Former MP from Herat Province and Founder of Pamir Cola Group of Company and Sadaf Aria Food Manufacturing Company.	Türkiye
Gen Ghulam Ali Wahdat	Former Police Chief and former Governor of Bamyán Province, and former Deputy Interior Minister for Logistics Support.	Türkiye
Habibur Rahman Afghan	Former Kuchi MP in <i>Wolesi Jirga</i> .	--
Allah Gul Mujahid (former district commander of Hezb-e-Islami)	Former MP in <i>Wolesi Jirga</i> from Kabul. An influential businessman from Deh Sabz District of Kabul Province. Currently detained and sentenced to imprisonment at Pul-e-Charkhi Prison in Kabul on murder charges.	Türkiye (returned via Iran)
Shahidullah Safi	Former Director of the Department of Work Permits Issuance for Expatriates, Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled Affairs.	--
Abdul Rauf Amiri (Jamiat-e Islami)	Former Mayor of Hairatan City in northern Balkh Province and former Member of the Balkh Provincial Council.	Iran
MARYAM KOOFI	Former Woman MP in <i>Wolesi Jirga</i> from Takhar Province. She is the sister of Fowzia Koofi, former woman MP and Second Deputy Speaker in <i>Wolesi Jirga</i> from Badakhshan Province and a leading Afghan women's rights activist.	--
Ahmad Yusuf Nuristani	Former MP in <i>Meshrano Jirga</i> and former Chairman of the Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan (August 2013–March 2016), former Governor of Herat Province and former Deputy Minister of Defence and Minister of Irrigation.	--
Mohammad Moeen Marastial	Former Afghan Consul General in Peshawar, former MP in <i>Wolesi Jirga</i> from Kunduz and former Deputy Minister of Education in the Karzai-led Afghan Interim Administration.	--
Ghulam Ali Rasikh	Former Acting Minister and Deputy Minister of Finance & Administration, Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation.	Türkiye
Daru Khan	Former District Governor of Ghorak in Kandahar Province.	Pakistan

Sayed Mahboobullah Sadat	Former Director of Kabul Traffic Department.	Germany
Sulaiman Hamid	Former Deputy Minister of Hajj and Awqaf and Adviser to President Karzai on judicial affairs.	Türkiye
Mukhtar Rashidi	Former Advisor to President Ghani on conflict resolution.	--
Khaliluddin Hakimi	Former Member of the Kunduz Provincial Council.	Iran
Abdul Waris Sherzad	Former District Governor of Bala Murghab in Badghis Province.	Iran
Muhammad Karim Jawzjani	Former MP in <i>Wolesi Jirga</i> from Jawzjan Province.	Iran
Shah Wali Shahid	Former Deputy Governor of Parwan Province.	Iran
2024		
Sohrab Qaderi	Former Member of the Nangarhar Provincial Council.	Iran
Faridullah Sherzai	Former Director of the Kabul Transport Department; and former Director of state-owned Fuel and Liquid Gas Enterprise, Ministry of Commerce and Industry.	--
Mohammad Hanif	Former Director of National Standards and Building Codes Development and Promotion, Afghanistan National Standards Authority, Ministry of Commerce and Industry.	--
FAWZIA GAILANI	Former Woman MP in <i>Wolesi Jirga</i> from Herat Province.	UAE
Shahpoor Hassanzai	Former MP in <i>Wolesi Jirga</i> from Logar Province.	Pakistan
Mohammad Ghulam Mullakhel	Former Director of Human Resource, Ministry of Finance.	Türkiye
Mirza Ali Bidar	Former District Governor of Qadis in Badghis Province.	Iran
Reza Khawar	Former Director General of Information and Communications Technology, Ministry of Communications and Information Technology.	Türkiye
Narender Singh Khalsa	Former MP in <i>Wolesi Jirga</i> on the reserved seat for Afghan Hindus and Sikhs.	Canada
Wahidullah Kalimzai	Former Deputy Interior Minister for Counter Narcotics and former Provincial Governor of Kunar and Ghazni.	UAE

Maiwand Nasiri/Naziri	Former Member of the Kabul Provincial Council.	UAE
Shahmahmood Mangal	Former Director General of Academic Council, Ministry of Education.	Canada
Said Mubin Shah Musamam	Former Commercial Attaché at Afghan Embassy in Washington, DC; former Deputy Minister of Finance; former Research and Policy Director, Afghanistan Investment Support Agency; former Programme Economist, USAID Afghanistan; and former Director General, Central Bank of Afghanistan.	US
Mohammad Qahir Haidari	Former Deputy Minister for Administration, Ministry of Finance; former Deputy Chief of Staff in President Karzai's Office of Administrative Affairs, and World Bank's former Operations Manager in Kabul.	US
Abdul Malik Hanafi	Former Provincial Chairman of the Independent Election Commission in Badakhshan.	Iran
Wahabuddin Sadat	Former Deputy Minister of Administration and Finance, Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, and former Deputy Mayor of Kabul.	US
Eng Mohammad Ayub	Former Minister of Water and Power in President Rabbani's government in the mid-1990s.	US
Gen Abdul Muzaffaruddin Yamin	Former Governor of Maidan Wardak Province. His son Hamid Yamin, who was said to be a former National Directorate of Security (NDS) official, was killed in Kabul on 10 April 2023.	Iran
Akhtar Mohammad Khan Badizai	Former Presidential Adviser on Public Affairs. Considered close to Kandahar Police Chief Gen Abdul Raziq, an Achakzai Pashtun, who was assassinated in October 2019.	Iran
Mohammad Nader Baloch	Former MP in <i>Meshrano Jirga</i> from Nimroz Province and former Deputy Chairman of the Nimroz Provincial Council, and Chairman of Baloch National Council of Afghanistan.	Türkiye
Dr Faizullah Kakar	Former Chief of Staff of the Office of President Ghani (July 2019–March 2020) and former Afghan Ambassador to Qatar (2016–2019). A qualified epidemiologist, he earlier served as Presidential Adviser on Health and Education Affairs (2009–2016) and was Presidential National Focal Point for Polio Eradication in Afghanistan, part of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's efforts to eradicate polio. He also twice served as Afghan Deputy Ministry of Public Health, from 1993 to 1995 and 2005 to 2009.	UAE

Hakimullah Akbari	Former Director of Finance and Administration, Khost Province.	Canada
Abdullah Jan	Former District Governor of Mandal in Nuristan Province.	Iran
Mohammad Azizi	Former District Governor of Nahrin in Baghlan Province.	Iran
Adil Shah Noorzai	Former Adviser to President Ghani on Anti-corruption and Land Acquisition Affairs.	Germany
Salahuddin Amin Arsala	Former Director General of Customs Law Enforcement, Ministry of Finance.	US
Abdul Qadir Safa	Former District Governor of Darwaz in Badakhshan Province.	Iran
2025		
Mohammad Yaqub Haidari	Former Governor of Kabul.	Iran
Abdul Halim	Former Director of Hajj and Religious Affairs Department, Badghis Province.	Iran
Mohammad Pazir Basij	Former Member of the Samangan Provincial Council.	Iran
Attaullah Paikar	Former Prosecutor in Attorney General's Provincial Office in Baghlan, and a member of the Afghanistan Prosecutors Association.	Iran
Sayed Iskandar Sadat	Former senior official at Faryab Police Headquarters.	Iran
Sayed Hassan Gardizi	Former MP in <i>Wolesi Jirga</i> from Paktia Province.	--
Abdul Latif Nahzat Yar (<i>Hez̤b-e Islami</i>)	Former MP in <i>Meshrano Jirga</i> from Nuristan Province and former Member of the Nuristan Provincial Council.	--

Table 2.2**Returnee Former Senior Afghan Military, Police
and Intelligence Officials**

Name of the Returnee*	Key Position(s) Previously Held	Country of Exile/Refuge
2022 (June Onward)		
Gen Dawlat Waziri	Former Spokesperson of the Ministry of Defence.	--
Maj Gen Mohammad Anwar Kohistani	Former Director of National Police Cooperative Fund, Ministry of Interior.	--
Brig Gen Ghulam Sakhi Roghliwanai	Former Provincial Police Chief of Paktika, Zabul, and Logar.	--
Col Jannat Gul Oryakhil	Former Commander of the Kabul Police Training Centre.	--
Brig Gen Habibullah Ahmadzai	Former Special Security Adviser to President Ghani.	--
Lt Col Dil Agha	Former Commander of the Tarin Kot Police Training Centre and Deputy in the Ministry of Interior. He was probably earlier Commander of the Kabul Garrison.	--
Ahmad Rashid Totakhel	Former Director General of Prisons and Detention Centres, Ministry of Justice.	Türkiye
General Abdul Salam Bakhshi	Former Director General of Prisons, Ministry of Justice.	--
Col. Mohammad Hassan Karokhel	Former Army Officer, 201 <i>Selab</i> Corps, Afghan National Army (ANA).	--
Najibullah Sarter	Former Provincial Police Chief of Paktia and Zabul.	Tajikistan

Gen Hayatullah Rustazada	Former Provincial Director of NDS in Bamyán Province.	--
Col. Mohammad Nabi	Former Deputy Police Chief of Badakhshan Province.	--
Brig Gen Abdul Wasi Ahmadzai	Former Provincial Director of NDS in Khost.	--
Maj Gen Abdul Baqi	Former Provincial Police Chief of Kunduz and Nuristan.	Iran
2023		
Gen Syed Kamal Sadat	Former Director General of the Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan; former Director of Operations/Training, Afghan Public Protection Force; and former Police Chief of Balkh Province. He also worked as security consultant/adviser for various international organisations.	--
Yama Khalidi	Former District Police Commander of Bilchiragh in Faryab Province. <i>Killed by 'unknown' armed men in the Sayyad District of Sar-e-Pul Province in August 2023.</i>	Iran
Col Mir Salam Adamkhel	Former District Police Chief of Sarobi in Kabul Province.	Iran
Gen Amir Mohammad Jamshid	Former Director General of Central Prisons Directorate/General Directorate for Prisons and Detention Centres, Ministry of Interior.	--
Hamidullah Sadaqat	Former District Police Chief of Haska Mina in Nangarhar Province.	Iran
Col Mohammad Nader	Former Commanding Officer /Operations Officer of the Afghan Border Police.	Iran

Col Aminullah Wardak	Former Army Officer, 203 <i>Tandar</i> (Thunder) Corps, ANA, Gardez, Paktia Province.	Iran
Brig Gen Mirwais Safi	Former Commander of 203 <i>Tandar</i> (Thunder) Corps, ANA, Gardez.	Iran
2024		
Brig Gen Mohammad Ayub Ansari	Former member of the government-appointed negotiating team in Doha, former Deputy Police Chief of Helmand Province and Provincial Police Chief of Logar and Herat. He probably earlier served with the Ministry of Transport under the first Taliban regime.	Türkiye
Col Abdul Alim	Former senior official at Samangan Police Headquarter. He probably also earlier served as the Programme Director of Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups Project in Afghanistan.	Saudi Arabia
Col Ghulam Dastagir Rahimi	Former Director of the Nangarhar Traffic Department.	Tajikistan
Aziz Ahmad Andarabi	Former senior official at NDS in Kabul.	Iran
Brig Gen Raz Mohammad Mandozai	Former Police Chief of Paktia Province.	Türkiye
Brig Gen Abdul Basir Khpalwak	Former Police Chief of Kapisa Province.	Türkiye

Brig Gen Mohammad Sharif Safi	Former Military Prosecutor of Kunduz Province.	Iran
Gen. Sayed Gul Agha Rouhani	Former Deputy Police Chief of Kabul, former Provincial Police Chief of Nangarhar and Paktia, former Commander of Kabul International Airport, and former Commander of National Police Academy, Kabul.	The Netherlands
Lt Gen Mohammad Shafiq Fazli	Former Commander of Afghan Border Police, Ministry of Interior; former Police Chief of Herat Province and Deputy Police Chief of Kabul.	Sweden
Gen Abdul Sami Seddiqi	Former Provincial Director of NDS in Khost Province.	UAE
Sharafuddin Stanikzai	Former Commander of NDS Unit in the Khanabad District of Kunduz Province.	Iran
Raz Mohammad Lonai (former PDP/A)	Former Provincial Director of NDS in Ghazni and other provinces.	Iran
Sanaullah Rohani	Spokesperson of the Badakhshan Police Headquarters.	--

** The ranks of military and police returnees listed in the table may not be accurate as it often varies from source to source. Some of the military returnees listed in the table had retired before the Taliban takeover.*

Table 2.3

Other Notable Returnees

Name of the Returnee	Position(s) Held	Country of Exile/Refuge
2022 (June Onward)		
Mawlawi Abdul Kabir Chichaka	Former Member of the Afghan Ulema Council and Adviser to <i>Meshrano Jirga</i> .	--
Janat Fahim Chakari	Former President of Karwan Institute of Higher Education in Kabul.	--
Nizamuddin Qaisari	Former Uzbek militia commander from Qaisar District of Faryab Province and a senior member of Abdul Rashid Dostum's Junbish-e-Milli.	--
Ehsanullah Arianzai	Former Director of <i>Ariana TV</i> and Adviser to the Afghan Government; and also probably the former President of Afghanistan Chapter of the South Asia Free Media Association.	--
Zia-ul-Haq Wazirzai	Founder& CEO of Wazirzai Global Group of Companies; Former Board Member of International Chamber of Commerce in Afghanistan; Founder of German-Afghan Chamber of Commerce and Industry–GACCI; and Co-founder and President of Paktika Chamber of Commerce and Investment.	--
Sayed Shamsuddin Sadat	Senior member of Junbish-e Milli and former head of Junbish in Balkh Province.	--
Mohammad Hakim Basharat	Correspondent of <i>Pajhwok Afghan News</i> .	Norway
Mohammad Saber Hakimi	Vice President of Harirod Construction Company.	--
Abdul Tawab Suratzada	Former Member of Board of Directors of the Afghan Chamber of Commerce and Industry.	--
Ahmadyar Gharany	CEO of Gharany Group of Companies. The company is mainly into construction, electric & power, gemstone, and mining sectors.	UAE

Najib Sharifi	President of Afghan Journalists Safety Committee and Founder President of Rumi Consultancy; and former Senior Political Officer, Office of the Special Representative of the EU for Afghanistan. He earlier worked for CNN, <i>National Public Radio</i> (NPR) and <i>The Washington Post</i> in Afghanistan.	UAE
2023		
Baryalai Noori	CEO of Kabul Ahrar Construction Company.	Tajikistan
Ali Mohammad Karimi	Probably former President of Samangan Branch of the Mawlana Jalaluddin Mohammad Balkhi University, Mazar-e-Sharif.	--
Ibrahim Asim	The owner of Khawar Construction Company (KCC) Private Limited. KCC is the developer for the Kabul New City Mega Project, which has been prioritised by the Taliban interim government.	UAE
2024		
Ahmad Hotak	Leader of the National Stability Party of Afghanistan.	US
Azizullah Kinjazada	A former commander of Jamiat-e Islami.	UAE
Nasim Doost	President of Doost Marble Factory in Herat, and former Member of Afghan Marble Industry Association and Herat Marble Union.	Canada
Zalmai Noori	Former journalist with the <i>Radio Television of Afghanistan</i> .	Iran
Abdul Khaliq Baloch	Chairman of Baloch Peace and Solidarity Council of Afghanistan, Helmand.	Pakistan
Mohammad Nader Noorzai	Founder and Chairman of Benawa Institute of Higher Education in Kandahar and former Member of the Kandahar Provincial Council. A relative of Afghan druglord Bashir Noorzai, who had worked closely with the Taliban leadership in Kandahar in the 1990s and also with the American and Pakistani intelligence agencies. Bashir was released from the American detention in September 2022 in exchange for US Navy veteran Mark Frerichs, who was kidnapped in late January 2020 and held in the Haqqani Network's custody.	Türkiye

Mohammad Wali Amini	Founder of <i>Millie</i> Amini Pharma Company, Kabul.	Iran
2025		
Zalmai Nusrat Momand	Former Deputy Director of Cadre and Personnel in the Ministry of State Security in President Mohammad Daoud Khan's Government in the 1970s.	Denmark
Abdul Haq Danishmal	Founder of Ariana Institute of Higher Education, Jalalabad and Kabul.	Türkiye

Sources: Compiled by the author based on statements issued by the members or the spokesperson of the Contact Commission and quoted primarily in the Taliban and Afghan sources, including the official *Bakhtar News Agency*, Al Emarah, X (formerly twitter) platform of the Contact Commission, and leading Afghan news agencies based in the country. The positions previously held by the listed returnees have been drawn from various sources.

It is evident from the above tables that a cross section of former Afghan ministers and deputy ministers and members of parliament and provincial councils, and ranking civil, military and police officials, including members of the former intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security (NDS), and business owners and heads of private institutions have returned to the country through the Contact Commission. However, it was reported that some of the high profile returnees left Afghanistan after a short visit or stay.⁴⁴ Here it is important to note that several of the former senior

⁴⁴ Banafsha Binesh, “Over 300 Former Govt Officials, Traders Returned to Country: Commission”, *Tolo News*, 12 September 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-179821> (Accessed 10 March 2023).

government officials, who were among the earliest to arrive through the Contact Commission, either had dual citizenship or foreign residency or had their businesses and families based outside the country. There were some who needed periodic medical attention and could not have stayed for long in view of the declining or the lack of specialised medical facilities in the country. It seems that some of them have since travelled in and out of the country. Just as they had not permanently returned to the country, they cannot be said to have permanently left the country.

Interestingly, some of them had returned from exile for the second time. They had earlier returned following the collapse of the first Taliban regime in late 2001. Mostly educated and long based in the West, they served in various capacities in the US-backed governments in Kabul and left along with the withdrawing Western coalition, particularly after the signing of the US–Taliban deal in Doha in February 2019. It is only ironical that their second return from exile came following the return of the same Taliban to power two decades later. Afghanistan has witnessed several waves of both exodus and return from exile of its educated and professional workforce, either preceding or following the political transitions in the country, over the past five decades. This time around, in the absence of any professional or business opportunities under the Taliban regime, their arrivals in Kabul 2022 onward have apparently been more a 'visit' than a 'return' to the country. This leads to the question as to why they have returned or for what reasons they keep travelling in and out of the country.

RETURNED FOR WHAT

It is noteworthy that several of the high profile returnees, who left the country in haste following the collapse of both the State and the economy in 2021, had allegations of official misconduct and misappropriation of government or international funds against them. Some of them had been charged or sentenced to imprisonment by the Attorney General's Office in the previous government. Some among them perhaps returned to either sell off their properties or manage their business interests whereas others came to explore new opportunities that usually open up with the change of regime. Their return in a way marked the coming together of the

corrupt elements from the previous regime and the internationally sanctioned members of the current regime. Several of the former parliamentarians and provincial council members, many of whom were businessmen and traders, also needed to take care of their immovable family assets and businesses.

Besides former ministers, parliamentarians, and senior civil and military officials, whose voluntary return through the Contact Commission was highly publicised and extensively reported—with photographs and video clippings of their arrival and reception at the Kabul Airport and meetings with senior Taliban leaders and ministers flashed across the Taliban-run websites and Afghan official news agencies and also numerous pro-Taliban social media accounts—several hundred mid to low level former Afghan civil, military, police and intelligence officials and personnel have returned, mostly forced returned or deported, mainly from Iran, Türkiye and US in the past three years.

Some members of the elite Khost Protection Force (KPF) arrived from the United States in mid-2024 with the facilitation of the Contact Commission. It was reported that immunity cards were issued by the commission to former KPF members.⁴⁵ The return of Afghan military personnel from Iran and United States could not have been voluntary, or completely voluntary. The KPF, which was directly backed and exclusively mentored and equipped by the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as a specialised counter terrorism force, was particularly despised by the Taliban. The KPF members were evacuated by the United States at the time of military withdrawal in mid 2021. Besides KPF, there were other CIA-backed strike forces and NDS-backed pro-government local militia units that acted without much oversight and were known to have used brutal tactics, including against the local population, to counter the

⁴⁵ “Liaison Commission Issues Immunity Cards to Returning Afghan Dignitaries and Former KPF Members”, *Bakhtar News Agency*, 21 July 2024, at <https://www.bakhtarnews.af/en/liaison-commission-issues-immunity-cards-to-returning-afghan-dignitaries-and-former-kpf-members/> (Accessed 21 July 2024).

Taliban. Their heavy handed approach turned the local population against the government and often worked to the advantage of the Taliban, particularly in the southeastern provinces.⁴⁶ Several of their commanders and fighters had left mainly for Iran at the time of the collapse of the Afghan Republic.⁴⁷

Besides reporting the return of former civil and military officials who served under the previous governments led by Karzai and Ghani, the commission also reported the return of a former official of the ministry of state security in President Daoud's government in the 1970s; former minister of water and power in President Rabbani's government in the mid-1990s; and the son and daughter of former Afghan Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Samad Hamid in Zahir Shah's government in the early 1970s.

The commission also claims to have facilitated the return of some members of the predominantly Tajik Jamiat-e Islami and Uzbek Junbish-e Milli, old arch rivals of the Taliban. Besides senior Junbish commander Nizamuddin Qaisari, who reportedly returned in June 2022, a month after the launch of the commission, two more senior Junbish members, including Jamiat's provincial head of Balkh, were said to have returned the very next month in July. A year later in July 2024, the commission claimed that a few Jamiat members returned from Iran, including a former member of the Balkh Provincial Council. The remaining were mostly low ranking Jamiat

⁴⁶ Stefanie Gliniski, "How the CIA Aims to Keep a Footprint in Afghanistan", *Foreign Policy*, 8 August 2019, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/08/how-the-cia-aims-to-keep-a-footprint-in-afghanistan-taliban-talks/> (Accessed 1 June 2025); "They've Shot Many Like This": Abusive Night Raids by CIA-Backed Afghan Strike Forces", Human Rights Watch, 31 October 2019, at https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/afghanistan1019_web.pdf (Accessed 1 June 2025).

⁴⁷ Jawid Hasanzada, "I'm Very Worried": Former Afghan Soldiers Fear Forced Return to Taliban-Ruled Homeland", RFE/RL, 13 November 2023, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-former-soldiers-fear-return/32682775.html> (Accessed 20 June 2024).

functionaries or local commanders. Interestingly, the commission also reported the return of two former bodyguards of Abdul Rashid Dostum in July 2022 and the former chief of Atta Mohammad Noor's security from the UAE in March 2024. A cursory glance through the Contact Commission's routine announcements suggests that immunity cards have been issued or are being issued to several hundred officials of the previous government returning to Afghanistan.

However, the Taliban track record in terms of enforcement and implementation of the 'general amnesty' across the country and on the ground has been questionable, despite senior Taliban leaders, particularly Acting Minister of Defence Mullah Yaqoob and Acting Minister of Interior Sirajuddin Haqqani, repeatedly urging the Taliban forces to refrain from carrying out revenge killings and violating the amnesty declared by Taliban chief Akhundzada.⁴⁸ To reinforce the idea of amnesty, Sirajuddin emphasised that the Taliban's amnesty is a sharia-based amnesty and not a political amnesty.⁴⁹

Amid reports of former government officials and security personnel returning to the country, there have also been reports of prolonged delay

⁴⁸ Abdullah Hamim, "Acting Defense Minister Orders Forces to Respect Amnesty", *Tolo News*, 24 September 2021, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-174778> (Accessed 25 September 2021); "Haqqani in Khost Again Calls for Respect of General Amnesty", *Tolo News*, 5 May 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-177880> (Accessed 6 May 2022); Ayaz Gul, "Taliban Tout Islamic Rule, Claim 'General Amnesty' Reunited Afghans", *Voice of America*, 25 October 2023, at <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-tout-islamic-rule-claim-general-amnesty-reunited-afghans/7326400.html> (Accessed 24 November 2023); "Acting Interior Minister Reaffirms Commitment to General Amnesty Decree", *Tolo News*, 10 August 2024, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-190170> (Accessed 13 August 2024).

⁴⁹ "Minister of Interior: Our Amnesty is Sharia-based Not a Political Amnesty", *Al Emarah*, 27 February 2022, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/minister-of-interior-our-amnesty-is-sharia-based-not-a-political-amnesty/> (Accessed 21 April 2024).

in the issuance of immunity cards by the commission to the returnees, arbitrary detention and repeated interrogation of the military returnees by the Taliban's intelligence agency, and continued security threat from rival Taliban commanders from the past. Despite the 'general amnesty,' former security personnel are often detained for indefinite period.⁵⁰ There are several reports suggesting a pattern of torture and killing of former Afghan security officials.⁵¹ There have also been reports of arbitrary detention and harassment of family members of exiled military and police commanders, allegedly by the Taliban intelligence agency looking for information about their whereabouts and also weapons. It is important to note that the Taliban security and intelligence agencies reportedly have access to biometric devices and database left behind by the previous government and Western agencies in the rush to make an exit, containing sensitive personal details of not only ordinary Afghan citizens and former civilian officials but also thousands of former military and security personnel, including pro-government militia commanders and fighters, and also interpreters who worked closely with Western forces and military contractors. Fearing reprisal, a large number of former civil and military officials, including women officials and interpreters, who could not leave the country are said to be in hiding and remain reluctant to register with the Contact Commission and seek immunity cards.

⁵⁰ "Former Afghan Security Forces Members Detained by Taliban Following Expulsion from Iran", *Afghanistan International*, 3 August 2024, at <https://www.afintl.com/en/202408036598> (Accessed 4 August 2024); "Dozens of Former Security Forces Imprisoned by Taliban in Nangarhar", *Afghanistan International*, 22 August 2024, at <https://www.afintl.com/en/202408223683> (Accessed 22 August 2024).

⁵¹ Mantasha Ansari, "Violating Prophet Muhammad's Tradition of General Amnesty: Taliban Fighters Systematically Target Former Soldiers, Police Officers, and Officials", *Hasbt-e-Subb Daily*, 20 April 2024, at <https://8am.media/eng/violating-prophet-muhammads-tradition-of-general-amnesty-taliban-fighters-systematically-target-former-soldiers-police-officers-and-officials/> (Accessed 20 June 2024).

Some of the returnees are said to have left the country as they felt vulnerable and threatened by old rivals and deceived by the Contact Commission. For instance, Ghalib Mujahid, the former district governor of Bihsud, Bati Kot and Achin in Nangarhar Province, who had returned from Iran through the Contact Commission, had to again leave the country due to attempts on his life and continued harassment by local Taliban members.⁵² There have been instances where the returnee former police officials and commanders have been killed. Lal Mohammad Gharibzadeh, a former police commander of Chaharbulak District in northern Balkh Province and a member of Jamiat-e Islami, whose return from Iran was facilitated by the Contact Commission and an immunity card was issued to him, was assassinated by ‘unknown’ armed men in July 2023.⁵³ Gharibzadeh was close to Atta Mohammad Noor, the former governor of Balkh and a leader of Jamiat-e Islami, who alleged that “a Taliban mercenary group” was behind the assassination.⁵⁴

⁵² “Former Official Who Returned to Afghanistan at Taliban’s Invitation Forced to Flee Again”, *Afghanistan International*, 16 May 2024, at <https://www.afintl.com/en/202405167769> (Accessed 18 May 2024).

⁵³ “Taliban Accused of Killing Former Police Commander in Balkh Province”, *Kabul Now*, 7 July 2023, at <https://kabulnow.com/2023/07/gunmen-kill-former-local-police-commander-in-balkh-province/> (Accessed 2 May 2025); Mohsen Ara, “The Taliban Shot a Former Local Police Commander in Balkh”, *Voice of Citizen News*, 7 July 2023, at <https://www.voc-news.com/en/2023/07/07/the-taliban-shot-a-former-local-police-commander-in-balkh-2/> (Accessed 2 May 2025); Naweed Yousufi, “Taliban Rejects Murder of Former Police Commander, Lal Mohammad Gharibzadeh”, *Kauser News Agency*, 7 July 2023, at <https://kausernews.com/taliban-rejects-murder-of-former-police-commander-lal-mohammad-gharibzadeh/> (Accessed 2 May 2025); Mustafa Sarwar, “The Azadi Briefing: Fear, Disillusionment Undermine Taliban’s Efforts To Woo Exiled Former Afghan Officials”, *RFE/RL*, 28 July 2023, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-woos-former-officials/32524328.html> (Accessed 2 May 2025).

⁵⁴ Atta Mohammad Noor, Former Governor of Balkh Province, X Post, 7 July 2023, 2:24 AM, at <https://x.com/Atamohammadnoor/status/1677058524063449090?s=20> (Accessed 2 May 2025).

Similarly, former police commander of Bilchiragh District in Faryab Province, Yama Khalidi, who had returned from Iran through the Contact Commission, was killed by 'unknown' armed men in Sar-e-Pul Province in early August 2023.⁵⁵ In August 2024, there were reports about the detention of former army commander Ahmad Shah, who had returned from Iran through the commission, in Jalalabad. Shah had earlier served with an Afghan army brigade based in Nangarhar.⁵⁶ Former MP from Logar Province Shahpoor Hassanzai, who had returned from Pakistan in early 2024, was detained twice by the Taliban.⁵⁷ Like some other high ranking returnees, he initially urged other Afghan parliamentarians to return to the country in a video clip posted on social media, but weeks later after he was detained the first time in March 2024, he posted another video where he accused the Taliban of deception and threatened to leave the country again.⁵⁸ In May 2024, it was reported that 73 members of the KPF, who after the completion of their training in US had returned to their families, had been under the Taliban detention in Khost for the past two years.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ "Former Afghan Police Commander Killed in Sar-e Pol Province", *Afghanistan International*, 8 August 2023, at <https://www.afintl.com/en/202308087439?nxtPslug=202308087439> (Accessed 12 May 2025); "Former Military Commander Shot Dead in Sar-e-Pol Province", *Kabul Now*, 8 August 2023, at <https://kabulnow.com/2023/08/former-military-commander-shot-dead-in-sar-e-pol-province/> (Accessed 12 May 2025).

⁵⁶ "Former Afghan Military Officer Arrested by Taliban After Returning from Iran", *Afghanistan International*, 24 August 2024, at <https://www.afintl.com/en/202408244930> (Accessed 26 August 2024).

⁵⁷ "Imprisoned by Taliban, Faced Humiliation & Now Will Leave Afghanistan, Says Ex-Lawmaker", *Afghanistan International*, 15 March 2024, at <https://www.afintl.com/en/202403151798> (Accessed 27 April 2025); Milad Sayar, "Ex-MP Shahpoor Hassanzoi in Taliban Custody for Past Four Days: Source", *Amu TV*, 29 September 2024, at <https://amu.tv/126768/> (Accessed 22 March 2025).

⁵⁸ Afghan Analyst, X Post, 15 March 2024, 1:05 AM, at <https://x.com/AfghanAnalyst2/status/1768360364545073608> (Accessed 17 May 2025).

⁵⁹ "Over 70 KPF Members Detained By Taliban Intelligence, Report Local Sources", *Afghanistan International*, 29 May 2024, at <https://www.afintl.com/en/202405296238> (Accessed 30 April 2025).

In December 2024, Col Rahamdil Hanafi, who was said to be a former bodyguard of Ashraf Ghani from Panjshir, and who had returned from Iran with the support of Acting Taliban Minister of Commerce and Industry Nooruddin Azizi, who too is from Panjshir, and former Taliban Governor of Panjshir Qudratullah Amini, committed suicide in Kabul after his wife was detained in his absence by the Taliban's intelligence agency.⁶⁰ Even Hashmat Ghani Ahamadzai, the brother of former President Ghani, who remained in Kabul even as the Taliban took over, had complained in May 2023 of harassment by Ibrahim Haqqani's men.⁶¹ Ibrahim Haqqani is a senior member of the Haqqani Network and an uncle of Sirajuddin Haqqani. Interestingly, Hashmat Ghani and Ibrahim Haqqani were believed to have known each other for a long time.

Besides the abovementioned cases of violation of the amnesty reported by Afghan media agencies based outside the country, both the United Nations and the Amnesty International have documented hundreds of instances of enforced disappearances and summary killings of former security officials and personnel, allegedly for having links with the anti-Taliban National Resistance Front or the Islamic State of Khorasan, over the past three years. It is no surprise that despite issuance of immunity cards, assured physical security has been among the key concerns and demands of the former civil and military officials returning to the country.

For the mid and low ranking military returnees, many of whom could not take their families along, life remains difficult and uncertain and future prospects mostly bleak. For those still exiled, it is simply about the lack of

⁶⁰ "Ashraf Ghani's Former Bodyguard Commits Suicide After Taliban Detains His Wife", *Afghanistan International*, 18 December 2024, at <https://www.afintl.com/en/202412185699> (Accessed 24 December 2024); "Five Days After Ashraf Ghani's Former Bodyguard Commits Suicide, Taliban Releases His Wife", *Afghanistan International*, 20 December 2024, at <https://www.afintl.com/en/202412208523> (Accessed 24 December 2024).

⁶¹ "Former Afghan President's Brother Accuses Haqqani Network of Harassing Him", *Afghanistan International*, 19 May 2023, at <https://www.afintl.com/en/202305190608> (Accessed 5 June 2024).

options as they continue to be deported, along with millions of Afghans who had sought refuge in Iran, Pakistan, Türkiye, Central Asia, United States and in EU countries.

Amid all, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) recently announced the termination of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Afghanistan, with effect from 14 July 2025, stating that Afghanistan “no longer continues to meet the conditions for the TPS designation”. According to DHS estimates, approximately 11,700 Afghan nationals in US come under TPS, out of which approximately 3,600 are also approved as Lawful Permanent Residents. Interestingly, the Secretary of DHS, having reviewed the situation in Afghanistan and having consulted appropriate US agencies, is said to have determined that “there are notable improvements in the security and economic situation” in Afghanistan and “the return of Afghan nationals does not pose a threat to their personal safety due to armed conflict or extraordinary and temporary conditions.”⁶²

The Secretary added that “permitting Afghan nationals to remain temporarily in the United States is contrary to the national interest of the United States”. In this regard, the Secretary referred to Afghan TPS recipients “who have been the subject of administrative investigations for fraud, public safety, and national security.” The Secretary further observed that “continuing to permit these Afghan nationals to remain in the United States does not champion core American interests or put American interests first” and that “the US foreign policy interests are best served and protected by curtailing policies that facilitate or encourage destabilizing migration.”⁶³

⁶² “DHS Terminating Temporary Protected Status for Afghanistan”, US Department of Homeland Security, 12 May 2025, at <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2025/05/12/dhs-terminating-temporary-protected-status-afghanistan> (Accessed 30 May 2025); “Termination of the Designation of Afghanistan for Temporary Protected Status”, US Citizenship and Immigration Services, Department of Homeland Security, 13 May 2025, at <https://public-inspection.federalregister.gov/2025-08201.pdf> (Accessed 30 May 2025).

⁶³ Ibid.

Interestingly, just two months before in March 2025, US Vice President JD Vance had described the Taliban as “one of the worst terrorist organizations in the world”.⁶⁴

Not surprisingly, the Taliban interim government issued a statement welcoming the US decision as “a positive step” and “an acknowledgement of existing realities, affirming progress in Afghanistan’s security & economic environment.” It further stated that the Taliban “stands ready to engage in constructive dialogue with the US & other countries regarding repatriation of Afghans who no longer meet criteria to remain in host countries.”⁶⁵ The Taliban not only felt that their claims about improved security and economic situation in the country stood validated but also saw an opportunity to sustain the momentum in bilateral ties generated by the recent release of foreign prisoners by the Taliban. The Contact Commission probably hopes that, similar to former KPF members deported earlier, several ranking former Afghan officials based in US would be forced returned or deported to Afghanistan in the near future.

INCENTIVES FOR AFGHAN INVESTORS

Meanwhile, the Taliban interim government, realising the humanitarian crisis facing the country and complex economic challenges ahead, encouraged Afghan traders, businessmen and investors to return to the country. The Taliban had been stressing on the need to strengthen the private sector

⁶⁴ “Remarks by the Vice President to U.S. Troops at Pituffik Space Base and an Exchange with Reporters in Avannaata Municipality, Greenland”, The American Presidency Project, 28 March 2025, at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-vice-president-us-troops-pituffik-space-base-and-exchange-with-reporters> (Accessed 2 June 2025).

⁶⁵ “IEA-MoFA Spokesperson Remarks Regarding the Termination of TPS for Afghanistan by U.S. Department of Homeland Security”, Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 13 May 2025, at <https://mfa.gov.af/en/18695> (Accessed 30 May 2025).

participation in rebuilding the country's economy.⁶⁶ The interim government has been struggling to convince the Afghan investors mostly based in Dubai to invest in the country. In December 2023, Acting Minister of Commerce and Industry Noorduddin Azizi noted that Afghan investors have made investments worth approximately \$150 billion in Türkiye and the UAE, and also some investments in Pakistan. Of the \$150 billion, about \$95 billion were invested in Türkiye and \$55 billion in the UAE, and as per unconfirmed statistics about \$3 billion in Pakistan. While Azizi reportedly acknowledged the huge investments made by Afghans in Iran but did not provide any details at the time.⁶⁷ However, a year later, in January 2025, he stated that as per the Iranian assessment, Afghans have invested about \$9 billion in the Iranian economy. He thereafter announced that 150,000 acres of land is being allocated to boost country's domestic industry and efforts are on to ensure regular supply of electricity for industries.⁶⁸

It is also said that half of the foreign companies registered in Iran are owned by Afghans. In July 2024, Chairman of the Iran–Afghanistan Joint

⁶⁶ "Deputy PM Kabir: Supporting Private Sector Investors is One of IEA's First Priorit [*sic*]", *Bakhtar News Agency*, 6 February 2022, at <https://www.bakhtarnews.af/en/deputy-pm-kabir-supporting-private-sector-investors-is-one-of-ieas-first-priorit/> (Accessed 30 March 2025); Tamim Shahir, "Baradar at Business Opening Calls for Afghan Investors to Return", *Tolo News*, 19 June 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/index.php/business-178558> (Accessed 21 June 2022); Bibi Amina Hakimi, "Kabul Offering Incentives for Investment in Afghanistan: Deputy PM", *Tolo News*, 28 December 2023, at <https://tolonews.com/business-186701> (Accessed 31 December 2023).

⁶⁷ Bibi Amina Hakimi, "Afghans Invest \$150 Billion Abroad: Azizi", *Tolo News*, 25 December 2023, at <https://tolonews.com/index.php/business-186654> (Accessed 31 December 2023).

⁶⁸ "Azizi Expresses Concern, Says Afghans Invested Billions in Neighboring Countries", *Ariana News*, 3 January 2025, at <https://www.ariananews.af/azizi-expresses-concern-says-afghans-invested-billions-in-neighboring-countries/> (Accessed 4 January 2025).

Chamber of Commerce Mahmoud Siadat stated that more than 50 per cent of foreign companies registered in Iran are owned by Afghans, which also makes them the largest foreign investor in Iran. Siadat further stated that Afghan companies have invested more than \$3 billion in Iran.⁶⁹ Interestingly, in April 2025, the Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants' Affairs of the Iranian Ministry of Interior informed that more than 2,000 Afghan doctors, including 700 specialists and subspecialists, are working in hospitals across Iran. It also stated that there are Afghan professors working on contract with various Iranian universities.⁷⁰

Relevant Taliban-led ministries have announced several measures to incentivise Afghan investors to return and invest in the country. In March 2024, the Taliban interim government announced a major reduction in customs tariff, from 2.5 per cent to 1 per cent, on import of raw materials to boost domestic production. In January 2025, Deputy Prime Minister Baradar, while speaking at a conference titled "National Call for Domestic Investment" in Kabul, announced a slew of measures to incentivise Afghan entrepreneurs to move their capital back and invest in the Afghan economy. He announced a five-year exemption from all taxes except employee payroll taxes for those setting up new industries in the country. He further announced exemption from custom duties on imported machinery and tools for industrial use and two-year visas for foreign technical experts hired for setting up industries in the country.⁷¹ About four months later, in May

⁶⁹ "Half of Foreign Companies Registered in Iran Belong to Afghan Nationals: Official", *Amu TV*, 9 June 2024, at <https://amu.tv/102982/> (Accessed 11 July 2024); "Afghans Invested \$3 Billion in Iran, Says Country's Official", *Afghanistan International*, 10 July 2024, at <https://www.afintl.com/en/202407107083> (Accessed 11 July 2024).

⁷⁰ "Iranian Official Says Nearly 2,000 Afghan Doctors Working in Iran", *Kabul Now*, 3 April 2025, at <https://kabulnow.com/2025/04/iranian-official-says-nearly-2000-afghan-doctors-working-in-iran/> (Accessed 4 April 2025).

⁷¹ Siyar Sirat, "Taliban Promise Incentives to Returning Investors in Bid to Boost Domestic Economy", *Amu TV*, 16 January 2025, at <https://amu.tv/151241/> (Accessed 17 January 2025).

2025, Acting Deputy Prime Minister for Administrative Affairs Hanafi stated while visiting Ghazni that Afghans who own large businesses in Pakistan will be given free land in industrial parks and exemption from all taxes for five years.⁷²

The owners of some of the Afghan companies have returned but none of them are major investors. Same can be said for several of the former members of parliament and provincial councils that have had family-run businesses and have returned through the Contact Commission. However, of particular note was the return of CEO of Khawar Construction Company (KCC) from the UAE in 2023. The KCC is a major developer of the New Kabul City mega project. The Taliban leadership has shown keen interest in taking the mega project forward.⁷³

Since late 2022, to deal with rising unemployment in the country, the Taliban interim government has also been working towards sending Afghan workers abroad, particularly to Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and also Russia.⁷⁴ The interim government has particularly sought to build strong ties with the UAE, which was one of the three countries that had recognised

⁷² Farid Ahmad Atiqi, "Islamic Emirate Grants Five-Year Tax Exemption to Returning Investors", *Tolo News*, 9 May 2025, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-194237> (Accessed 9 May 2025).

⁷³ "Construction Works of New Kabul City Kicks Off", *Al Emarah*, 17 August 2023, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/construction-works-of-new-kabul-city-kicks-off/> (Accessed 7 May 2025); "New Kabul City: A Beacon of Hope for Afghanistan's Future", *Al Emarah*, 25 June 2024, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/new-kabul-city-a-beacon-of-hope-for-afghanistans-future/> (Accessed 7 May 2025); Siyar Sirat, "Taliban Re-inaugurate Practical Work on Kabul New City Project", *Amu TV*, 10 December 2024, at <https://amu.tv/142858/> (Accessed 7 May 2025).

⁷⁴ "Over 60,000 Workers to be Sent Abroad for Work, Official", *The Kabul Times*, 9 November 2022, at <https://thekabultimes.com/over-60000-workers-to-be-sent-abroad-for-work-official/> (Accessed 3 May 2025); "Plans Underway to Send Afghan Workers Abroad Amid Rising Unemployment", *Tolo News*, 28 April 2025, at <https://tolonews.com/business-194102> (Accessed 29 April 2025).

the first Taliban regime in the 1990s, and currently an Abu Dhabi-based firm has the contract to run multiple Afghan airports, including Kabul International Airport. The Chairman of Afghan Business Council in Dubai, Obaidullah Sader Khail, had reportedly stated in February 2023 that “80 percent of the major Afghan traders have homes here and central offices [in UAE] and they have business in 45 to 50 countries including Afghanistan”. He also informed that about 300,000 Afghans are based in Dubai.⁷⁵ In the same month, Taliban Minister of Commerce and Industry Nooruddin Azizi also announced the setting up of a consortium of companies that included 14 companies from Afghanistan and some from Iran, Russia and Pakistan. The consortium was supposed to work on an investment plan worth \$1 billion mainly in the field of energy, mining, and infrastructure.⁷⁶ However, despite offering several incentives, Afghan investors remain wary of making huge capital investments in the manufacturing sector which is supposed to generate much needed employment, particularly as hundreds of thousands of Afghans continue to be forced returned from Pakistan and Iran.

OBSERVATIONS

After the initial return of several high profile returnees, the number of returnees had gone down. Some efforts seem to have been made by the Contact Commission to bring clarity to the terms and conditions for the members of the former government returning to the country.⁷⁷ Senior

⁷⁵ Mitra Majeedy, “80% Afghan Traders Based in UAE: Sader Khail”, *Tolo News*, 26 February 2023, at <https://tolonews.com/business-182244> (Accessed 1 March 2023).

⁷⁶ “Taliban Sets Up Investment Consortium with Firms from Russia, Iran”, *Reuters*, 22 February 2023, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/taliban-sets-up-investment-consortium-with-firms-russia-iran-2023-02-22/> (Accessed 23 February 2023).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

figures from the previous government have been questioning the overall approach as well as the method adopted by the commission to facilitate their return, particularly the requirement to fill up application forms provided by the commission. Taking a strong exception to it, they instead suggested that the commission approach key figures from the previous regime and hold delegation-level talks to first address their concerns.⁷⁸ Mohammad Umar Daudzai, who served in various senior positions in the previous regime including as Afghan Ambassador to Pakistan and Iran and former Minister of Interior, was said to have stated:

The Contact Commission's attitude is insulting and does not match our Afghan culture and tradition. Inviting someone is not in that way, the form is available on the internet and you have to fill it. Instead of a form, go and talk to them face to face about their concerns, their addresses are obvious, some of them are in the United Arab Emirates or in Qatar or in Turkey or in the countries of Central Asia, but still no one on the behalf of the IE [Islamic Emirate] has yet met them.⁷⁹

Some of the exiled former Afghan figures have also been of the opinion that the commission must first engage the former leaders already based inside the country before approaching the ones based outside.⁸⁰ The Afghan opposition leaders, senior military and police officers, and thousands of educated Afghan professionals—both male and female, and Pashtun and non-Pashtun, often look at the commission as a mechanism to lure them into the Taliban trap.

⁷⁸ "Former Officials: We Will Return to Afghanistan, But Not Only by Contact, Should a Delegation Be Sent" [*sic*], *Shamshad News*, 18 May 2023, at <https://shamshadnews.com/en/2023/05/18/former-officials-we-will-return-to-afghanistan-but-not-only-by-contact-should-a-delegation-be-sent/> (Accessed 22 March 2025).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ "Political Figures in Country Ask for Kabul's Engagement", *Tolo News*, 23 May 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-178134> (Accessed 3 May 2025).

In fact, the commission has failed to stop the exodus of educational professionals from the country.⁸¹ The brain drain continues as the Taliban interim government has yet to create conducive atmosphere particularly for Afghan youth to remain in the country. The background profile of both the acting Taliban minister of education and the acting Taliban minister of higher education does not inspire any confidence or hope in the country's education sector. One is a former head of the Kandahar Ulema Council and the other a military commander who earlier served as the provincial police chief of Nangarhar and the governor of Kabul. The position of academic professionals who stayed back remains precarious as several of them, particularly those engaged in the higher education sector, have been either removed and replaced or downgraded in the past three years.

The low enrollment rate of students primarily due to the ban on secondary and higher education for girls has led to the closure of several private educational institutions in the country. As the ultraconservative Kandahar cliché led by Akhundzada continues to exert its control through vice and virtue directorates established in all ministries and departments and ulema councils set up in all the provinces, a systematic effort seems to be on to gradually weed out appointees from the previous regime including in the higher education sector. With the Taliban prioritising the establishment of jihadi madrassas across the country, the future prospect of modern education and institutions of higher learning in the country only appears bleak. The altering of national educational curricula and contents of the textbooks by people notably unqualified to undertake such an exercise on the one hand, and making civil appointees undertake a written test to check their religious credentials on the other, both geared at institutionalising the process of ideological indoctrination, makes the overall employment scenario complex for the returnee educated professionals.⁸²

⁸¹ Pia Krishnankutty, “‘Professor Exodus’: Afghanistan’s Brightest Minds Are Fleeing Taliban Rule, Again”, *The Print*, 29 August 2022, at <https://theprint.in/world/professor-exodus-afghanistans-brightest-minds-are-fleeing-taliban-rule-again/1101836/> (Accessed 27 August 2024).

⁸² “Under The Taliban, Public Employees Must Pass Test of Faith”, RFE/RL, 8 September 2022, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-ministries-tests-islam/32024524.html> (Accessed 3 May 2025).

The declining academic standards and shrinking space for modern education, and restrictions on female education and employment, makes it difficult for the educated Afghans and technocrats to permanently return and bring their families along. On a contrary note, several Taliban leaders are known to have their sons and daughters receiving modern education outside the country, particularly in Qatar and Pakistan.⁸³ Some senior leaders had directly or indirectly expressed their support for the reopening of secondary schools and universities for female students.⁸⁴ Anas Haqqani, a member of the Contact Commission, had reportedly stated while addressing a gathering in Kabul that "in the name of Propagation of Virtue & the Prevention of Vice, we should not cause people to hate

⁸³ Praveen Swami, "School Ban for Afghan Girls, But Taliban Leaders' Daughters Play Football, Study Medicine Abroad", *The Print*, 13 April 2022, at <https://theprint.in/world/school-ban-for-afghan-girls-but-taliban-leaders-daughters-play-football-study-medicine-abroad/913150/> (Accessed 22 August 2022); "Taliban Official Admits Daughters Go to School as Afghan Teens Are Banned", *Newsweek*, 10 May 2022, at <https://www.newsweek.com/taliban-afghanistan-girls-education-ban-official-daughter-comment-1705389> (20 May 2025); .

⁸⁴ "Deputy Foreign Minister Calls for Girls' Education", *Tolo News*, 22 May 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-178128> (Accessed 20 May 2025); Tamim Shaheer, "Stanekzai Calls for Inclusion of Women in Govt Departments", *Tolo News*, 7 July 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan-178832> (Accessed 8 July 2022); Asma Saayin, "Islamic Emirate Officials Stress Need to Facilitate Female Education", *Tolo News*, 23 August 2023, at <https://tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan-184777> (Accessed 7 October 2023); Naweed Samadi, "Senior Intelligence Official Stresses Importance of Modern Education", *Tolo News*, 12 January 2024, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-186926> (Accessed 13 January 2024); Fidel Rahmati, "Education Key for Afghanistan's Development, says Abbas Stanikzai", *The Khaama Press*, 22 February 2024, at <https://www.khaama.com/education-key-for-afghanistans-development-says-abbas-stanikzai/> (Accessed 24 February 2024); "Political System Not Only for Taliban & Clerics, Says Senior Group Official", *Afghanistan International*, 16 April 2024, at <https://www.afintl.com/en/202404166572> (Accessed 18 April 2024); Siyar Sirat, "Haqqani Warns Religious Leaders Against Alienating People from Islam", *Amu TV*, 7 January 2025, at <https://amu.tv/149146/> (Accessed 8 January 2025).

Islam, but we should take care of the people in the way we sacrificed for them before.”⁸⁵

Similarly, realising that madrassa pass outs do not have the required skill sets to run the affairs of the government, former Deputy Prime Minister for Political Affairs Mawlawi Kabir reportedly stated in June 2023: “Besides religious studies, modern sciences should also be added to the madrassa curriculum so that graduates could gain the required knowledge and work for government institutions as well.”⁸⁶ It was also reported that at several places, the local Taliban authorities have converted schools and other training centres into madrassas in their quest to implement Akhundzada’s decree to open jihadi madrassas in all districts.

In the absence of any avenue for formal or modern education beyond sixth grade, the female students, unlike male students who have the option of attending modern schools where both religious and secular subjects are taught, are forced to receive religious education and only in madrassas, mostly run by Taliban clerics from Pakistani madrassas. According to UNICEF, an estimated four million Afghan girls would be impacted if the ban continues until 2030.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Banafsha Binesh, “Islamic Emirate’s Suhail Shaheen Clarifies Hijab Rules”, *Tolo News*, 11 May 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-177965> (Accessed 12 May 2022).

⁸⁶ Nizamuddin Rezahi, “Madrassa Graduates Lack Knowledge to Work for Govt Institutions, Says PM Kabir”, *The Khaama Press*, 15 June 2023, at <https://www.khaama.com/madrassa-graduates-lack-the-potential-to-work-for-govt-institutions-says-pm-kabir/> (Accessed 19 June 2023).

⁸⁷ “Statement by UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell on the Third Anniversary of the Ban on Secondary Education for Girls in Afghanistan”, UNICEF, Press Release, 21 March 2025, at <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/new-school-year-starts-afghanistan-almost-400000-more-girls-deprived-their-right> (Accessed 25 May 2025); “UNAMA Expresses Deep Disappointment as Ban on Girls’ Secondary Education Goes into Fourth Year”, UNAMA, 26 March 2025, at <https://unama.unmissions.org/unama-expresses-deep-disappointment-ban-girls%E2%80%99-secondary-education-goes-fourth-year-0#:~:text=UNAMA%20expresses%20its%20deep%20disappointment,%2C%20humanitarian%2C%20and%20economic%20crises> (Accessed 25 May 2025).

The 'emirate' is apparently held hostage to the whims and fancies of the Kandahar cliché, which enjoys absolute unaccountability. In the garb of implementing the Sharia-based rule across the country, the Akhundzada-led cliché in Kandahar, fearing dilution of its power and hold of clerics over the 'emirate', continues to exert greater control and authority over 'Kabul affairs'. On a political plane, the current Taliban regime, like the previous Afghan regimes, including the first Taliban regime of the 1990s, seems to be failing in making timely course corrections. The Taliban hardliners appear bent on executing the old unfinished political and ideological agenda of the 1990s.

On the whole, the return of former Afghan government officials, civil and military, may have served good optics for the Taliban but it cannot necessarily be regarded as increased endorsement of the 'emirate' and its policies. It has not led to, and is neither meant to lead to, a grand reunion of Afghan forces representing conflicting ideologies and contrasting worldviews. There are very few instances where the Taliban interim government has retained or employed former Afghan officials and professionals at higher (not necessarily senior) levels. In such a scenario, the Contact Commission cannot bridge the divide between the regime and the exiled or returnee Afghans, unless the regime itself acts as a bridge connecting various ethnicities and identities that make up the Afghan Nation.

Looking beyond high optics associated with the return (often the deportation) of members of the former Afghan Republic to the country, the Contact Commission set up by the Taliban regime in 2022 comes across as a strategic move to present itself as a conciliatory and legitimate state entity on one hand and undercut the support base of the fragmented exiled political opposition on the other. This is best manifest in the fact that the Taliban has opened a pathway for exiled political opposition and former civil and military personnel to return to the country but without yielding any political space or making any provision to integrate the returnees into its governing structures.

The Commission's efforts are stymied by violations of the 'general amnesty' announced for members of the former regime, lack of employment avenues for the educated non-Taliban workforce, and the ban on higher education for girls and work opportunities for women. In such a scenario, the Commission cannot bridge the divide between the regime and the exiled or returnee Afghans, unless the regime itself acts as a bridge connecting diverse ethnicities and identities that make up the Afghan Nation.

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