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Understanding Taliban Treatment of Women in Afghanistan

Introduction

The Taliban of Afghanistan enacted extremely severe gender policies when in power in Afghanistan. These policies shocked international observers, led to protests and campaigns by various women's groups, and added to an impression that the Taliban supported an anti-modernist Islam. The Taliban justified these policies with the claim that the Sharia supports such measures as do the traditional customs of Afghanistan. Just a short list of their gender policies includes forbidding women to work outside of the home, requiring women to wear a head-to-toe covering when they venture out into public, forbidding girls from attending school, preventing women from going out in public unless accompanied by a close male family member, preventing women from wearing certain kinds of clothing or jewelry, applying harsh punishments for fornication and adultery, and using captured women from Afghanistan's internal war as slaves. Among the effects of these policies were that Afghanistan's women came to experience the lowest life expectancy and literacy rates in Asia, the highest infant mortality rate in Asia, and substantially increased incidences of begging and prostitution than before the rise of the Taliban (World Almanac and Book of Facts 2000, 1999, 768; United Nations Children's Fund, "Statistics," www.unicef.org/statis/, 1999; Interviews and personal observations in Afghanistan in 1992 and 1997).

Many scholars have argued that Islam does not require such stringent treatment of women and have castigated the Taliban accordingly. Yet the Taliban became the most celebrated Islamist movement of the 1990s, inspiring radical Muslims around the world and promoting the Talibanization of neighboring countries. This support helped the Taliban to

maintain their radical policies (not only toward women, but also with regard to support for terrorism, drug trafficking, and ethnic cleansing), despite their condemnation and rejection by the vast majority of the world community.

Why did the Taliban choose this path with regard to gender issues, which deviates so far from the “straight path” of Islam, as well as from the norms of the international community of the twenty-first century? How did Afghanistan’s women respond to the Taliban’s gender policies and, what, do they expect from the current regime? We saw that the Taliban did not moderate their policies under pressure from the secular West and more moderate Islamic regimes -- or perhaps such pressure was not exerted, since after September 11th, the West determined to oust the Taliban. This chapter attempts to answer these questions, but begins with a careful description of Taliban policies toward women.

The most controversial and perhaps only well-developed part of the Taliban program was in the area of social policy. An Islamization ideology was most evident in the Taliban's social policy, especially with regard to the treatment of women and girls, but also with regard to a range of policies, such as those concerning religious practices, minority rights, and entertainment.

No governance issue attracted such negative attention to the Taliban as their policy toward women. From the beginning of their period of rule, the Taliban turned the clock back on women’s rights in Afghanistan by instituting a policy based on a mutated version of traditional Pushtunwali conceptions of a woman’s place and role in society. In traditional Pushtun areas, women always led a restricted life, as their virtue was considered integral to family and clan honor. The tides of twentieth-century secularization and modernization in Afghanistan provided greater opportunities for women to participate in public life, especially in northern and urban

areas. This was true, with some limitations, until the recent ascendance of Islamists. At that time the association of Communism with modernization undermined the status of women and introduced substantial restrictions on their lives once again. The Taliban, however, made the issue of women's roles and status a cornerstone of their Islamization program. Indeed, the policies toward women and girls, in conjunction with the law and order policies, in many ways constituted the centerpiece of Taliban public policy.

Prior to the Taliban's rise to power (in Kandahar in 1994, Herat in 1995, Kabul in 1996, and most of northern Afghanistan after 1998), women in Afghanistan traditionally had been treated as inferior to men, both economically and legally. Under the Shariah, daughters received half as much in inheritance as sons and female testimony counted half as much as male testimony in court. Women had less access to money, even their dowries and bride prices, less recourse to divorce, and little freedom in terms of their sexuality or family planning. On the other hand, a woman's status could vary "according to the woman's age and the norms of the social and ethnic groups to which she belonged" (Kakar, 1979, 171). Among all groups, older women had great influence within the home, but usually very little outside of it. Attitudes toward *purdah*, veiling, and female seclusion varied by group, with southern Pushtuns and Uzbeks among the most strict, while Hazaras, Nuristanis, *powindas*, and some Tajiks were less strict. Among the largest ethnic group, the tribal Pushtuns, who have dominated the country since 1747, *Pushtunwali* (the tribal code of the Pushtuns) overlapped with and at times supplanted the Shariah as a source of legal doctrine and dispute settlement. *Pushtunwali*'s primary themes governed male behavior, and gave special attention to that behavior that centered on disputes arising over women, land, and honor. Some important themes of *Pushtunwali* include *melmastia* and *mehrmalpineh* (both concerning hospitality to guests), *nanawati* (the right of asylum), *badal* (blood revenge), *tureh*

(bravery), *meranah*(manhood), *imandari*(righteousness), *ghayrat*(defense of property and honor), and *namus*(defense of the honor of women)(Dupree, 1973, 126; Quddus, 1987, 67 -76; Singer, 1982, 46 -59).

The twentieth century saw a gradual improvement in the status of women in part of Afghanistan, primarily Kabul and the other major urban areas. Especially important were the modernizing reforms under Amir Habibullah Khan (1901 -1919, who introduced modern education to Kabul; King Amanullah (1919 -1929), who attempted to educate women, reform discriminatory marriage practices, and free women from the veil; and King Zahir Shah (1933 -1973), during the later years of his rule. Led by members of the royal family, women were educated in large numbers from the 1950s onwards, and especially in Kabul they were able to work in government offices, drop the veil (after 1959), and run for public office (from 1965). These freedoms continued under the leftist nationalist government of Mohammad Daoud (1973 -1978).

The Communist takeover in Afghanistan in 1978 began the process that led to the current decline in women's status there. During the period of Communist rule (1978 -1992), women in Kabul and the other government-controlled large cities such as Kandahar, Herat, Jalalabad, and Mazar-i-Sharif enjoyed greater freedom than ever before, becoming a majority of the student population at Kabul University, serving in paramilitary units, working in all professional sectors, and serving in high ranking government positions (including one Politburo member, Anahita Ratebzad). The majority of Afghan women, however, lived in the contested countryside or were driven into exile as part of the world's largest refugee population from 1981 -1996. The refugee camps of Pakistan provided sanctuary for the mujahideen (holy warriors) who eventually defeated the Soviet Union and its puppet government. The camps also became a

fertile ground for the new Islamist ideology of many of the mujahideen groups, which in combination with the dramatically different living conditions than traditional Afghan villages, curtailed women's freedom of movement and led to a retreat once again to the veil. The camps also bred a new generation of Afghan fighters, who came of age in a drastically altered society, where women's status and control over women's behavior and activities became symbols of the differences between the Communist governments and their mujahideen opponents. Caught in a society undergoing rapid transformation, many young boys failed to learn the traditional balance that existed among rural Afghans in their attitudes toward women — that women were to be controlled, but also respected.

The fall of the Najibullah government in 1992 ushered in a period of civil war and warlordism between various rivals for power in Afghanistan. While shifting coalitions battled for control of Kabul (centered generally on President Burhanuddin Rabbani's Tajik-dominated party Jamiat-i-Islam on one side, and Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Pushtun-dominated Hezb-i-Islami party on the other side), various regional warlords and local commanders controlled different areas of the country. Good governance and the rule of law were often absent from Afghanistan during this period, and women suffered not only through the continuation of the war, but in some places became the victims of molestation, abduction, and rape. Indeed, one of the reasons offered by the Taliban for their early campaign to capture Kandahar in 1994 was to eliminate rapacious local commanders who had preyed on women (and young boys) for their own pleasure. More realistically, the Taliban were a Pakistani militia bent on stabilizing Afghanistan and thus allowing it to become a trade corridor to and from Central Asia. Their remarkable success in Afghanistan over the past six years has not been without defeats and setbacks, however. Yet after each setback — and after each major triumph — the

Taliban have tightened even further in their policies toward women. It appears as if the position, activities, and behavior of women are the most important issues to the Taliban, and that their policies toward women are the cornerstone of their national policy. Why?

First, the Taliban are divided internally into various factions and groupings. Many of the rank-and-file soldiers are impoverished teenagers with little exposure to the world outside of a madrassa. Some observers believe the Taliban leaders wish to moderate their stance on women, but fear alienating their base of support among the hard-line elements within their ranks. Others think that the Taliban leadership fears the “corrupting” influence exposure to women would have on their teenaged followers, who have led sheltered lives until now. As Dupreenotes, “The authorities are dependent on their young militia as a base of power, but they are less than sanguine about their real ability to control them” (In Maley, 1998, 151). These two reasons Taliban policy toward women has become so important to their overall approach to government is that they have virtually no other policy. They have few able administrators, a tiny budget, no industry, and a single-crop agricultural economy. Their primary reason for existing is to fight their northern opponents inside Afghanistan, and such revenues as they have been able to acquire are devoted to the war effort. The only policies they can introduce, then, are regulatory and symbolic outgrowths of their Islamist identity. The Taliban have virtually no program with regard to more traditional areas of social policy, such as public health, infrastructure reconstruction, and education. In these policy areas the Taliban rely almost completely on outside organizations for assistance, both in keeping with Afghanistan’s traditional governmental preference for a rentier economy and the Taliban’s focus on warfare to the exclusion of all else. Taliban foreign policy is constructed on maintaining decent enough relations with at least one neighbor in order to facilitate transit trade with Pakistan and seeking international recognition.

Thus, the Taliban have made their social policy toward women the centerpiece of their approach to governance, despite significant opposition to their policy both within Afghanistan and from the broader world community. Several explanations for this approach include:

- to maintain unity among their forces
- to prevent their forces from being corrupted
- because it is an integral part of their ideological world-view that was shaped in isolated misogynist madrassas (a “politics of fear”)
- because they are incapable of implementing more substantive policies.

The evidence for the Taliban policy toward women being central to their overall approach to governance is clear and convincing, as follows:

- the Taliban have developed a general policy framework toward women, key parts of which are always among the first things implemented when the Taliban take control of an area
- the Taliban have deepened and broadened the specific regulations that flesh out that policy over time, and have applied those regulations throughout the territory they control with little or no regard for local sensibilities
- the Taliban have constructed their most effective government agency to insure the implementation of their policies. This institution is the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (Amr bil -Maroof wa Nahi Anil -Munkir), which patrols the streets enforcing social policies concerning attire, beards, games, entertainment, interaction with foreigners, and especially the appearance and role of women in society.

The religious police clearly are modeled on the similar institution in Saudi Arabia and reflect the Saudi influence among the Taliban leadership.

Despite repeated Taliban protestation that their policies toward women are supported by Islamic law and/or cultural practices, are merely temporary responses to the exigencies of war, or reflect the aberrant application of a general policy by overzealous or misguided local officials, we should not be misled. Even recent evidence that suggests the Taliban may be relaxing certain policies slightly, should not disguise the truth — that the foundation of Taliban governance is based on subjugation of women, and that a remarkable and wide array of specific policies are promulgated and implemented to achieve that end.

Taliban Policy Toward Women

The range of Taliban policies toward women is extensive, and has been refined and added to since the beginning of their period of rule. For the purposes of this paper, six major areas of gender policy are delineated. These are:

- Women's right to appear in public
- Women's right to work
- Girls' right to education
- Women's right to adequate healthcare
- Women's rights in personal dress
- Women's rights before the law

Collectively, these policies have virtually eliminated women from the public space. Their presence now on the streets of Kabul, Herat, or even Kandahar is almost always shadowy and

peripheral, and there is now widespread begging and prostitution, especially among the large population of war widows.

From the earliest moment of the Taliban coming to power they prevented women from leaving their homes, except under a variety of restrictions. For example, a decree from the religious police in November 1996 following the Taliban capture of Kabul said, “Women should not step outside your residence” (Rashid, 2000, 217). This general restriction has usually been modified in two major ways. First, women may appear in public if they are accompanied by a legally acceptable escort, namely a close male relative, such as a husband, father, or brother (*mahram*). This fits with traditional behavior among rural Pushtuns, where upon reaching puberty females are segregated from all males other than close family members. It is not required by Islamic law, nor is it common practice among the more cosmopolitan urban Afghan women, at whom the policy was precisely directed. Second, if a woman has an acceptable escort, she may leave the home only if fully veiled, which the Taliban indicated meant being covered from head to toe (requiring adoption of the *burqa*, the head-to-toe form of the veil common among Pushtun women). Although modest clothing is called for in the Koran, veiling practices differ throughout the Islamic world, and indeed, throughout Afghanistan. Most non-Pushtun Afghan women have traditionally used what the Taliban specifically ban as unacceptable, an Iranian-style light shawl or scarf (*chaderi*). Additional restrictions on female movements include Taliban decrees forbidding taxi drivers to pick up unescorted women or to allow them to ride in the front seat, forbidding women to go to hotels for social events like wedding celebrations, and the requirement in Kabul that windows of residences be painted black so that passers-by not be able to catch glimpses of any women within. Numerous instances of women being beaten for violation of these rules have occurred over the past six years, and taxi

drivers have also been beaten for picking up unescorted women (This has been documented widely, for example: Physicians for Human Rights, 1998; Palmer, 1998, 734-735; "Talebans say 225 women punished for improper dress," Reuters, 1996; US Department of State, 1996, 1997, 1998; Confidential interviews, Kabul, July 1997). As Dupree notes, women rarely suffer serious physical injuries from these beatings, but since the "intent is to humiliate," there is often "considerable psychological damage" (In Maley, 1998, 152). Veteran Afghan observers find the spectacle of young Afghan males beating older females not of their families' or improper dress remarkable, since traditional Pushtun society considered women's honor to be family and clan matters. While a Pushtun man would almost certainly consider unacceptable a female member of his family appearing in public unveiled, he would find it even more unacceptable that a man not of his family had touched his female, even to punish her.

Taliban decrees have also targeted women's right to work and provided a major area of dispute with the United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organizations working inside Afghanistan. As noted by the Physicians for Human Rights, "With the exception of a small percentage of positions available as health workers and as surveyors with international aid organizations, Afghan women are not permitted to work" (1998, 73). This ban extends to women from other Islamic countries assigned to aid organizations in Afghanistan, and exists despite a long tradition of women working in important positions in Afghan society. No Taliban practice enjoys less support in Islamic doctrine, or has had such dire consequences for Afghan society. Taliban justifications for the practice are that male family members should take care of females, and that widows should be provided for by the government. They also argue that widespread male unemployment would be at least partially mitigated by a ban on female unemployment. Hundreds of thousands of Afghan war widows, however, find that in practice

the government does not take care of them, and in the absence of supportive family members, these women have been made destitute. After the Taliban takeover, female unemployment immediately jumped to over 80%, with special impact on some economic sectors. For example, prior to the Taliban ban on female employment, “women accounted for seventy percent of all teachers, about fifty percent of civil servants, and forty percent of medical doctors” (Physicians for Human Rights, 1998, 75). Thus, not only has the ban on female work harmed females and especially female-headed families, but it has had dramatic and harmful impact on Afghanistan’s education and health care systems as well. Moreover, for those war widows who cannot flee to Pakistan, abject poverty has been the byproduct of their forced unemployment. In turn, this has led to a dramatic increase in begging (female begging in Afghan cities was unheard of prior to the Afghan War, now the Western visitor is accosted —politely— one every street) and prostitution among Afghanistan’s desperate urban war widows.

At some point, some Taliban official has justified every Taliban edict, no matter how bizarre, in terms of Islam. These justifications occur despite the limited religious knowledge of senior Taliban policymakers and their refutations of their religious interpretations by astonished mainstream Islamic scholars. Yet, as Ahmed Rashid notes, “For the Taliban anyone questioning these edicts, which have no validity in the Koran, is tantamount to questioning Islam itself, even though the Prophet Mohammed’s first task was to emancipate women... [The Taliban believed they] were right, their interpretation of Islam was right and everything else was wrong...” (2000, 107). Eventually, the Taliban came to reconsider or modify some of their policies, or when faced with clear Koranic evidence to the contrary of their positions, have offered alternative non-religious explanations for certain policies. The best example of this is in the area of girls’ education.

Perhaps none of the Taliban policies toward women have attracted as much negative attention as their edicts forbidding or restricting schooling for girls. From their earliest taste of power in November 1994 when they took control of Kandahar, the “Taliban immediately implemented the strictest interpretation of Shari’ah law ever seen in the Muslim world” (Rashid, 2000, 29), and they began by closing girls’ schools. The attitude of Taliban leaders toward girls’ education grew out of their own provincial worldviews, coming as they did from some of Afghanistan’s most rural and least literate villages. Other Afghans, including eastern Afghan Pushtuns, Afghan refugees in Pakistan, and especially urban Afghans, valued education for girls and boys. They pointed out that the Koran and Islamic law do not support the Taliban position on female education (education for girls is accepted under the major schools of doctrine of Islamic law), and the Taliban sought a different justification for their policy even as they modified it. Overlooking the preexisting cultural practice for female-only schools, Taliban leaders claimed that their injunction against girls’ education was merely temporary, an unfortunate inconvenience imposed by the continuing conflict in Afghanistan. As Maulvi Qalamuddin, head of the religious police, noted in 1997, “We will be blamed by our people if we don’t educate women and we will provide education for them eventually, but for now we have serious problems” (Rashid, 2000, 106). The problems they often cited to justify continued delays were related to security, specifically to ensure complete segregation of female from male students. As time passed with no changes in Taliban policy, even in completely controlled Taliban areas such as Kandahar, however, UN and Western aid organizations became cynical about the true purpose of these regulations. Some organizations, such as UNICEF in November 1995, suspended their educational operations in protest (Dupree in Maley, 1998, 146). Others, like Save the Children, helped support the efforts of local groups who ran hundreds of private

girls' schools in people's residences. Taliban officials have not maintained a consistent policy toward these schools, allowing them to exist in some places and times, and closing them in other circumstances, almost never for any easily discernible reason (Physicians for Human Rights, 1998, 75). There have even been some cases where girls have been allowed to attend coeducational facilities (Fange 1995), and recent reports of greater openness in allowing female education (Constable, 1999). The modified Taliban policy toward girls' schooling is to only allow it up to the age of eight and to only allow the study of the Koran. Overall, the general trend has been to deny girls the opportunity to have schooling, especially given that the Taliban have controlled certain areas of the country for over six years now (Interviews, Herat and Kabul, July 1997).

A fourth major area of Taliban mistreatment of women concerns their lack of access to adequate healthcare. Numerous Taliban edicts address this area of women's lives, and collectively provide the greatest impact on their standard of living. In October 1996, the Taliban closed 32 public bathhouses reserved for women in Herat and Kabul, which were the only source of hot water for many women in those cities and important to women's hygiene (Dupree in Maley, 2000, 145). In November 1996, eleven edicts governing women's access to medical care were announced. These rules required gender segregation in healthcare, so that female patients be treated only by female physicians and nurses, and male patients by male medical personnel (Rashid, 2000, 218). Extraordinary measures were required to limit contact that might need to occur between the sexes, including that doctors only be able to question women wearing burqas or their male family members about their illnesses and not actually examine patients physically, or that they only be able to examine the "affected part" of the female patient (Rashid, 2000, 218). Moreover, "In January 1997, Taliban officials announced a policy of segregating men

and women into separate hospitals” (Physicians for Human Rights, 1998, 65). This policy has not been enforced fully since then, but when it has been women have found the few hospitals and clinics available to them to be lacking in even the most basic requirements for providing medical care, such as “clean water, electricity, surgical equipment, X-ray machines, suction, and oxygen” (Physicians for Human Rights, 2000, 65). Contributing greatly to the overall deterioration of health care services for females has been the prohibition on female employment, which has prevented thousands of female doctors, nurses, and pharmacists from providing health care even in segregated facilities. The Physicians for Human Rights bluntly note that “Afghan women are thus caught in the paradoxical bind of being compelled to seek care only from female providers at the same time that governmental decrees ensure a dwindling supply of such providers” (1998, 70).

The overall impact of Taliban policies on female health care has been to deny women (and many children, especially those from families headed by widows) health care. This has had clear negative effects on women’s standard of living in Afghanistan. Life expectancy for women is only 43–44 years old, nearly 20 years less than the average for developing countries. It is so low because of maternal mortality rates (17 per 1000) and infant mortality rates (163 per 1000) that are the highest in the world, because less than six percent of births are attended by trained medical personnel (Physicians for Human Rights, 1998, 70), and because “only 29 percent of the population has access to health and 12 percent has access to safe water” (Rashid, 2000, 107). In a survey of 160 Afghan women (80 living in Kabul, 80 who had fled Kabul for Pakistan) conducted in 1998 by the Physicians for Human Rights, 97% of respondents met the clinical criteria for depression, 86% had significant symptoms of anxiety, and 42% suffered from post

traumatic stress disorder (1998, 49-50). Thus, both the physical and mental health of Afghan women, already poor after years of warfare, have deteriorated sharply under Taliban rule.

As discussed earlier, under the Taliban women have been forced to wear the all-enveloping shroud, or burqa, when leaving the home. Other edicts have also addressed the area of personal attire and appearance. According to a 1996 edict, women may not venture out wearing “fashionable, ornamental, tight and charming clothes to show themselves, [or] they will be cursed by the Islamic Sharia and should never expect to go to heaven” (Rashid, 2000, 217). Tailors have been prevented from taking female measurements and sewing clothes to order for women, nor may photography shops or hairdressers function in an unrestricted manner. In July 1997 the Taliban announced further limits on women’s dress, banning high-heeled shoes, white socks or shoes, ankle jewelry (or anything that made noise when they walked — women should not be heard or noticed!), and cosmetic. Hospitals were especially singled out as places where stylish dress was banned, which seems odd until you remember that by 1997 these were practically the only places where women could go outside of their homes. It all seems absurd, except that the Taliban take it seriously and beat women who fail to comply.

Finally, women have been denied political representation or civil rights to appeal their mistreatment (Confidential interview, Kabul, July 24, 1997). In numerous ways, the Taliban approach to governance has denied women equal treatment with men under the law. All of the aforementioned restrictions make it difficult for Taliban women to communicate with the men who are in positions of authority. Nonetheless, there are rules in place to further restrict that communication. Women may not enter some government buildings, and must enter others through “women’s entrances.” They may not hold positions in the government, serve as judges or lawyers, or engage in journalism or political activities. Indeed, a Taliban edict of 1997 limited

women working only in the medical field, primarily as “female health workers” (women were later allowed to work in other capacities for international aid organizations, such as in women-only bakeries run by the World Food Program that were temporarily closed in August 2000). Women’s testimony in judicial proceedings counts only half as much as a man’s, and women do not enjoy equal rights with men in inheritance, divorce, child custody, and other family law matters. Perhaps most problematic is the routine excesses against women by low-level members of the religious police. Thousands of women have been beaten on the spot or detained with no legal recourse for minor violations of the dress code or on the whim of some Taliban official. The few protests against this treatment have all been suppressed harshly.

The depth and breadth of these policies indicate clearly that Taliban intentions are to constrain and marginalize women. Collectively, these policies have produced the lowest standard of living for women anywhere in the world, whether measured by health, economic, or political indicators. To borrow from Ahmed Rashid, they have created “a vanished gender” in Afghanistan (2000, ch. 8). What makes it all the more appalling is that these policies are deliberate and are sometimes justified — falsely — as Islamic. They are the clearest symptom of the disease of Talibanization, which has been brought about by the destruction of the Afghan country in two decades of horrible war.

Gender Apartheid – The Enslavement of Afghan Women in the Twenty-First Century

The transformation of the position of women in Afghanistan since the rise of the Taliban provides an excellent illustration of the profound changes that have occurred in Afghan society during the past two decades. Indeed, the ascendance of the Taliban represents the culmination of the Islamist trend in Afghanistan, but much of the groundwork for that trend was laid during the

1980s by the various mujahideen groups now held to be *Islamic* by the Taliban (Magnus and Naby, 1998). Nonetheless, many Taliban policies based on their interpretation of Sharia are not popular outside of the rural Pushtun areas in which they have their roots. That the Taliban continue to make their gender policies the centerpiece of their program of governance, even in the face of overwhelming international and domestic opposition, reveals the depth of their antagonism for women and the feminine side of nature. Moreover, their continued use of anti-women policies as a rallying point for their rank-and-file followers suggests clearly that these policies will see little meaningful moderation in the foreseeable future.

Therefore, Afghanistan today has become only half a nation, as some 11 million of its citizens have been driven indoors, into the shadows, to rot and die. This paper is not only an effort at scholarship, an attempt to explain the reasons for the Taliban's behavior toward women, but it is also a call to action. If the Taliban do not alter their policies toward women, an entire gender will disappear as an important part of a nation's culture. What could bring about a change in Taliban policy? Two alternatives are most likely.

First, despite the best intentions and work of organizations and individuals as varied as Amnesty International and Mavis Leno, pressure from Western or even Middle Eastern/Islamic actors does not have much impact on Taliban policy. Quite simply, the Taliban consider themselves to be bound by the Sharia, as they interpret it, not by various agreements under international law. Afghan governments have signed or become a party to virtually every major international agreement governing women's rights, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) of 1967; the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) of 1966; the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (CPRW) of 1966; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

(Women's Convention) of 1979; the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) of 1989; and the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment (CAT), which Afghanistan ratified in 1987. Taliban policies violate provisions of all of these documents, and also flout the moral voice provided by declarations following major international conferences that addressed women's issues, such as the World Conference on Human Rights ("Vienna Declaration"), The International Conference on Population and Development ("Cairo Program"), and the Fourth World Conference on Women ("Beijing Platform") (Physicians for Human Rights, 1998, ch. 5). Through painstaking, eventful negotiations, aid organizations on the ground in Afghanistan have had some success in pushing for incremental changes in some policies. Their success, however, is directly related to their provision of something the Taliban need, and is always minimal because they do not provide any service on which the Taliban place great value. Nonetheless, it is apparent that the Taliban do respond to pressure when it involves something of real value.

Thus, to induce the Taliban to change their core social policy upon which their system is based requires enormous pressure. The one thing the Taliban really want is military power, and the keys to their power are the warm materiel, fuel, recruits, and money they receive from Pakistan. The only way to reduce the power of the Taliban is to cut the umbilical cord by which they are attached to Pakistan. The key, then, is not to pressure the Taliban to change, but to pressure Pakistan to cease supporting them. This difficult but not impossible task is complex and I will leave discussion of it to another day.

Second, observation of the behavior of Islamist movements over the past two decades suggests that, as they mature, they also moderate. Moreover, the greatest incentive for moderation is actual governance. Thus, perhaps the best solution for the women of Afghanistan

is a final solution for Ahmed Shah Massoud and his merry band of northeastern Tajiks. If the Taliban achieve a comprehensive and final victory in Afghanistan's interminable war, then perhaps they will finally be acknowledged by the international community as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Then, perhaps, they will finally do as they have so often promised in return for such recognition, and moderate their stance toward women, ethnic minorities, heroin, and terrorism. Perhaps they will even give way to an elected government that includes non-Taliban representatives. Even if this exercise in fantasy should occur, however, the dismal plight of Afghanistan's women would continue as is for some time to come. Gender apartheid would gradually turn into gender genocide. While the world watched... and waited... for Afghanistan's women to die.

Of course, much has changed since I wrote this conclusion. The Taliban have not yet been routed, but the end is in sight. In a post-Taliban government, I believe we can look forward to many changes for women, but they will not instantly rise from this situation to one of total liberation.

*Note. This paper was written in August of 2001. The author has promised an update based on his observations in Afghanistan in May and June as part of the process and the loyaji game meetings.

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