

Two years of Taliban rule: documenting human rights abuses using open source

A report by Afghan Witness



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Please note: this report may contain links to graphic content. AW may have removed links to content posted by individual social media accounts.

Executive summary

When the Taliban assumed power in Afghanistan in August 2021, the group's leadership sent a message to international governments: this time would be different. Women's rights would be respected, security assured, and a general amnesty granted to all who had fought against the group or worked for the former government. These were the messages Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid delivered in a speech just days after the group seized Kabul.

"We have pardoned anyone, all those who had fought against us," Mujahid announced during the Taliban's first press conference following the takeover. He added that *"Security has been assured"* and promised that women's rights would be respected *"within the framework of Sharia"*. When asked about press freedom, Mujahid replied that the Taliban *"are committed to media within our cultural frameworks"*, and that private media can *"continue to be free and independent."*

Since October 2021, Afghan Witness (AW) has been using open source data collection and analysis techniques to collect, preserve and verify user-generated content and media reports emerging from Afghanistan. This report aims to provide an overview of the project's monitoring across four categories: human rights violations (HRVs) and abuses related to right to life, torture and liberty; the rights of women and girls; violations against vulnerable and marginalised groups, and the freedom of civil society and the media to operate. Data the project has collected and analysed over the last two years paints a very different picture to the promises made in the initial days of the Taliban takeover.

Throughout the last two years, there has been a steady stream of reports of human rights abuses. As well as widespread reports of killings, detentions and torture there are continuing reports of reprisals targeted at former Afghan defence and security forces (ANDSF), as well as arrests of civil society activists and journalists. In October 2022, the Taliban also announced the return of public punishments in Afghanistan, resulting in frequent lashings, as well as two executions, issued by the Taliban-led Supreme Court. Restrictions on women's rights have gradually worsened throughout the last two years: after an initial period of uncertainty and a degree of flexibility at local levels, the Taliban have introduced nationwide edicts targeting women's dress, ability to work, access to education and freedom of movement. Hundreds of reports of women being violently killed by Taliban, family members, or unknown actors have also surfaced.

- AW has recorded 3,329 reports of human rights abuses since January 15, 2022 relating to infringements of the right to life, right to freedom from torture, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, women's rights and more.

- There has been a steady reporting of the killing and detention of former ANDSF members. Since January 2022, AW has recorded 112 claims of killings and 130 detentions – likely an undercount, given the high number of cases where the victims and perpetrators are unidentified.
- AW has recorded 56 announcements by the Taliban-led Supreme Court issuing punishments in public to more than 350 individuals, predominantly for ‘moral’ crimes such as having an illicit relationship, sodomy and adultery.
- Despite wide-ranging and increasing suppression of resistance to Taliban rule, AW has verified nearly 70 women-led street demonstrations since the first one in August 2021, in large part protesting increasing restrictions on girls’ and women’s access to education and work. Between March 1, 2023 and June 27, 2023, AW recorded and analysed 95 separate women’s protests, including 84 indoor protests and 11 street demonstrations across 12 provinces in Afghanistan.
- Between January 15, 2022 and July 20, 2023, AW recorded 188 cases of women being killed by a range of actors, including family members, unknown perpetrators, and in some instances, alleged Taliban members.
- Afghanistan has seen the gradual erosion of space for independent media and civil society. AW has recorded 67 reports of civil society activists and protesters being arrested between January 15, 2022 and July 20, 2023.
- During the same period, AW recorded 98 reports of journalists, photographers and media commentators being detained by the Taliban across Afghanistan.
- Afghanistan has seen numerous attacks by Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP) on Hazara and Shia communities since 2016. These continued during the Taliban’s first year of rule, with mosques, schools and religious celebrations targeted. Across the two year period, AW records show that ISKP have claimed 29 attacks on Hazaras and Shias, resulting in the deaths of 193 people and 454 injured since August 2021, according to media reports.

Based on AW’s open source monitoring, there have been some differences in trends in the first and second years of Taliban rule. The first year saw the group clamp down on dissent, with the reported arrests of women’s rights activists, journalists and protesters. The Taliban issued a series of restrictions on the media which, coupled with economic constraints and the flight of journalists, has led to the reported closures of hundreds of outlets.

The overall level of armed violence in the country immediately decreased following the Taliban takeover. However, the security situation in the first year of the group’s rule remained volatile, with IS affiliate ISKP committing regular attacks on both civilian and Taliban targets. Spring 2022 saw an offensive erupt between resistance forces and Taliban in the north of the country, which led to widespread allegations – some verified by AW – of human rights abuses committed against resistance fighters, including extrajudicial executions and mass arrests.

The second year of Taliban rule, however, has been somewhat different. Our open source monitoring indicates that as a result of both Taliban restrictions and self-censorship, media and opposition in the country have largely dispersed, though reported arrests of women’s rights

activists, educational campaigners and journalists have continued. Women have continued to protest against Taliban restrictions and edicts, but protests have largely been held indoors – seemingly an attempt by protesters to conceal their identities and reduce the risk of facing arrest or violence. Despite these threats, women have still taken to the streets to protest major edicts, including the ban on women’s university education in December 2022, and the closure of beauty salons in July 2023. In both cases, AW verified examples of the Taliban responding with force, using aerial gunfire and water cannons to disperse protesters.

AW has recorded far less activity by resistance forces during the second year of the Taliban’s rule, and, after several high-profile attacks claimed by ISKP in the first few months of 2023 – mainly targeting Taliban figures – AW has also seen a drop-off in ISKP activity following a period of intensified raids against alleged IS cells in March and April. ISKP also appear to have shifted away from attacks on civilians and Hazara and Shia neighbourhoods and have focused instead on predominantly Taliban targets.

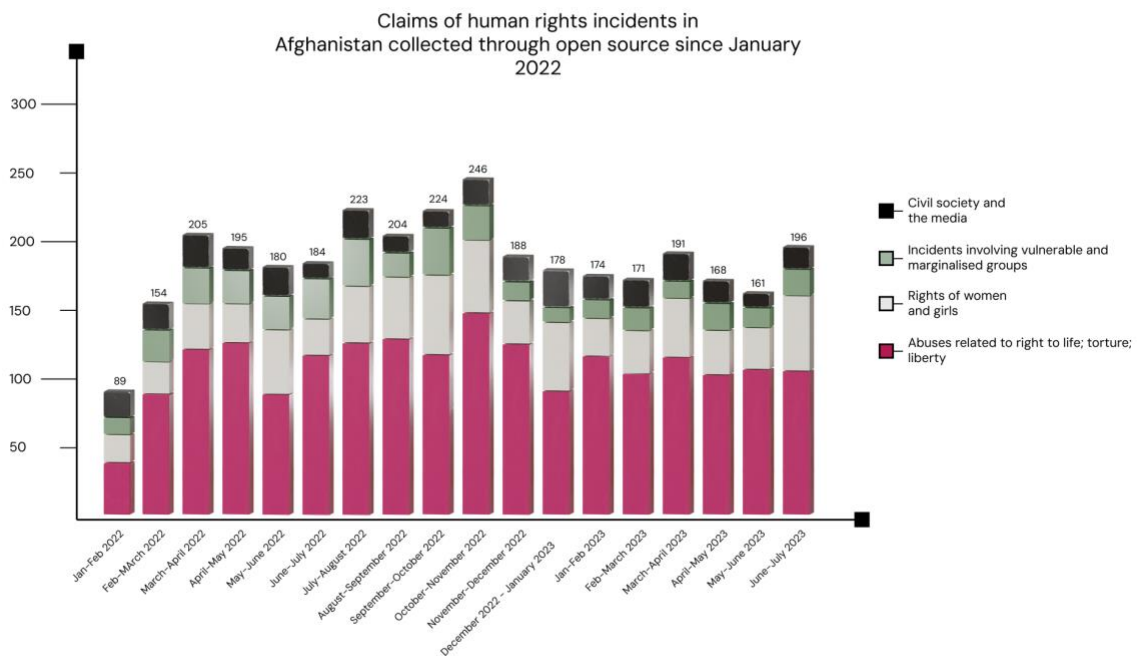


Figure 1: a graph showing the number of reported human rights incidents recorded per reporting period by AW between January 15, 2022 and July 20, 2023.

A note on “verified” and “unverified” data

AW collects and archives information gathered from social media and digital channels, and, where possible, investigates claims further using techniques such as geolocation to verify images and videos. The research included in this report consists of both verified and unverified

information. Most is based on our monthly HRVs tracker, which has recorded claims of human rights abuses across four categories (HRVs and abuses related to right to life, torture, liberty; freedom of civil society and the media to operate; human rights violations against vulnerable and marginalised groups; and the rights of women and girls) since January 2022.

Collection of data for our monthly tracker involves the daily monitoring of social media and digital channels, with keyword searches carried out in Pashtu, Dari and English, as well as other languages, on platforms such as Telegram, Twitter and Facebook. Posts from social media users and local media are scrutinised and multiple reports of the same incident de-conflicted. Claims are then assigned to one of the four categories. The nature of evidence assigned to the categories is described in the different sections of the report. Where possible, we have attempted to supplement unverified claims with verified case studies, corroborative information from sources on the ground, or with reporting and investigations conducted by other organisations or journalists.

When AW describes a piece of content as “verified”, it means that investigators have been able to confirm, with a high degree of confidence, the location and date of a piece of footage or a photograph. If a claim is “unverifiable” it does not necessarily mean it is untrue, rather that there is insufficient evidence available to verify a time and location of the imagery.

The Taliban’s restrictions on the media have caused particular challenges for journalists investigating human rights issues, and the resulting self-censorship due to fear of reprisal has led to limited visual evidence surfacing online. As well as this, a lack of internet access in some regions, or Taliban rules around photographing or recording incidents, has also likely suppressed visual evidence. AW is conscious of the limits of open source monitoring in Afghanistan and, in particular, is mindful that verified incidents alone – which are recorded in our [interactive map](#) – likely represent just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to human rights abuses in the country.

Section 1: Human rights violations related to the right to life, torture and liberty



Summary: since the Taliban's return to power, there has been a steady stream of alleged killings, beatings and detentions. While some have allegedly involved former Afghan security forces members (ANDSF) and ex-government workers, many reports have involved unidentifiable targets and perpetrators – making it difficult to verify who was targeted and why. Claims of human rights violations have also been driven by clashes and unrest between Taliban forces and resistance fighters in the northern provinces of Panjshir, Baghlan and Takhar, with the conflict intensifying in Spring 2022 as the Taliban sought to reassert control over these areas. November 2022 saw the Taliban announce the enforcement of Sharia punishments in Afghanistan, which has led to regular announcements of public lashings – as well as two executions – mainly for a range of 'moral' crimes.

The targeting of former security forces and government workers

In August 2021, when thousands rushed to leave the country as the Taliban seized power in Kabul, the Taliban announced a general amnesty for former government workers and members

of the nation's security forces. Soldiers who had fought against the Taliban "*have been pardoned,*" Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid attempted to assure journalists at a press conference days after the takeover. "*Those with families at the airport waiting, if they come back to their homes, no one is going to do anything to them; they will be safe,*" he added.

Days after those remarks, reports emerged of the Taliban conducting door-to-door searches for people who worked with the former Afghan government or Western countries, with claims of reprisal killings soon surfacing. A seven-month investigation by the Opinion Video team of *The New York Times* claimed that nearly 500 former government officials and members of the Afghan security forces were killed or forcibly disappeared during the Taliban's first six months in power, while UNAMA recorded 160 extrajudicial killings, 178 arbitrary arrests and detentions, 23 instances of incommunicado detention and 56 instances of torture and ill-treatment of former ANDSF and government officials in the period between August 15, 2021 and June 15, 2022.

Between January 15, 2022 and July 20, 2023, AW recorded 112 cases involving the alleged killing of former ANDSF members, as well as 130 detentions. This is likely an undercount considering the steady stream of killings recorded by AW on a monthly basis where the victims and alleged perpetrators are not identified and limited details or evidence is available. The project's monthly monitoring of cases has flagged two broad categories of claims involving former security forces. The first category involves targeted arrests and killings, where individuals are apparently taken, arrested and then killed, with bodies often surfacing or being given to families after a certain period. The second category is former ANDSF members killed in Taliban operations – usually raids which the Taliban claim to have conducted against criminals, resistance or ISKP.

AW noted an uptick in reported arrests and killings of former ANDSF members between January and March 2023. There were several notable incidents around the time of this spike, including the alleged arrest of 43 ANDSF and former government members across two days in Helmand province in February, as well as house searches reportedly conducted in Kabul, Parwan and Takhar in January and February. The reports of house searches were accompanied by claims that the Taliban were searching for former ANDSF and National Resistance Forces (NRF) members ahead of the spring offensive. During this period, details also emerged of several particularly violent killings and dismemberments of former ANDSF members, as well as the public display of bodies after the Taliban claimed to kill a number of criminals and rebels in targeted raids.

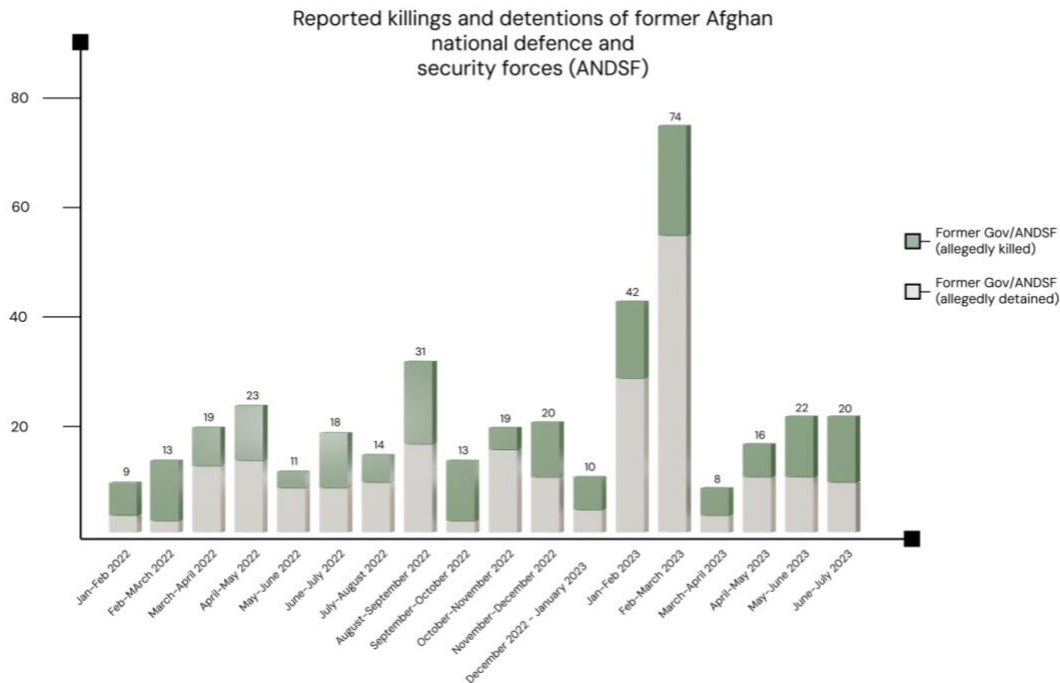


Figure 2: a graph showing the number of reported killings and detentions of former ANDSF members per reporting period, between January 15, 2022 and July 20, 2023.

Case study: Taliban display bodies of alleged criminals and insurgents

In March 2023, the bodies of six alleged ‘kidnappers and insurgents’ were publicly displayed near the Blue Mosque in Mazar-i Sharif. The local police spokesman claimed eight were killed in a joint operation by the 888 Unit and Police Headquarters in Balkh province. AW was able to verify the presence of seven bodies and weapons in images of the raid, although open source evidence suggested the weapons were placed next to the bodies after death. Family members of the victims, which reportedly included a former ANDSF member, claimed their relatives were innocent and had been handcuffed and shot at close range.

In a separate incident on the same day, the Taliban displayed two more bodies alleged to be thieves at the side of the Blue Mosque. Similar incidents also took place in Herat in late February, when the Taliban publicly displayed the bodies of alleged thieves at major intersections in the city. AW investigated a similar case in February 2022, when the bodies of three ‘kidnappers’ were displayed in different parts of Herat city. At the time, AW verified the incident and was able to corroborate reports that one of the victims was a former military officer.

Widespread claims of human rights abuses in Panjshir

On September 7, 2021, the Taliban claimed to have captured Panjshir, a historical stronghold of resistance in Afghanistan and the last province outside their rule. As the Taliban flag was raised, resistance fighters denied defeat, arguing they were still present in "*all strategic positions*" and would "*continue to fight*". Clashes between the two sides intensified in Spring 2022, traditionally known as the fighting season¹ in Afghanistan. Since the takeover, regular reports of human rights abuses have surfaced from the Panjshir Valley, despite Taliban claims in June 2022 that fighting had ceased. Claims include forced displacement, reprisal killings and detentions targeting both alleged resistance as well as civilians. Ascertaining total casualty figures and the extent of alleged abuses is challenging, however – the valley is isolated both physically and digitally, and press restrictions reportedly limit journalists' ability to investigate claims.

Case study: verified summary executions in Panjshir

In September 2022, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid claimed 40 resistance fighters had been killed and 101 captured as part of a "*large-scale clearance operation*" conducted in the Rukha, Dara and Afshar districts of Panjshir province. Around this time, footage surfaced online showing five men – hands bound behind their backs – being shot at close range on a mountaintop in a rugged rural landscape.

The footage led to an in-depth, open source investigation by AW, with the team conclusively linking one group of Taliban fighters to the execution of ten men. Footage of the execution of five men was geolocated to a mountaintop in Pochaveh Valley, in the Dara-e-Hazara area of Dara district, Panjshir. The five victims were also matched to earlier footage showing them being marched up the mountain – this video was geolocated within metres of the execution site.

¹ "Fighting season" referred to the cyclical restarting of fighting every Spring during the War in Afghanistan, and is thought to be based on agricultural cycles driven by the opium poppy harvest, improved weather conditions, and recesses in Pakistani madrassas, as well as related socio-economic factors.



Figure 3: one of several screenshots of videos geolocated by AW investigators and used to verify footage of the executions [35.338321, 69.697990]

The group of Taliban fighters were identified with five more men who were later executed. One victim was seen being marched up the mountain alongside the first five, and two were recorded being interrogated by the fighters. The bodies of these three men were photographed together at an unidentifiable location, but likely within the vicinity of the first execution site.

The last two confirmed victims, allegedly father and son, were photographed in captivity and recorded being interrogated by a fighter from the Taliban group, who was also present at the mountaintop executions. The bodies of the two men were later shown in a video at an unidentifiable location. As part of the investigation, AW also gathered credible – though unverifiable – evidence of a further 17 executions and 30 deaths as a result of the Taliban offensive against alleged resistance fighters in Panjshir.

The reintroduction of public punishments

In September 2021, shortly after the Taliban takeover, one of the senior Taliban leaders, Mullah Nooruddin Turabi, told AP that “*Cutting off of hands is very necessary for security,*” and that it had a deterrent effect. He said the Cabinet was studying whether to punish people in public and would “*develop a policy.*” Little over a year later, the Taliban announced the return of Sharia punishments in Afghanistan, raising fears of a return to the stadium punishments that became synonymous with the first period of Taliban rule.

AW has been monitoring the Taliban-led Supreme Court’s announcements of public punishments since October 2022, which have been broadcast on the court’s Twitter page and website. As of August 4, 2023, the total number of announced public punishments recorded by

AW stands at 56.² AW records indicate that punishments have been handed out to 353 people, including 51 women. The claimed offences are predominantly ‘moral crimes’ such as illicit relationships, adultery, sodomy, as well as running away, in addition to ‘conventional’ crimes such as robbery, drug smuggling and alcohol production.

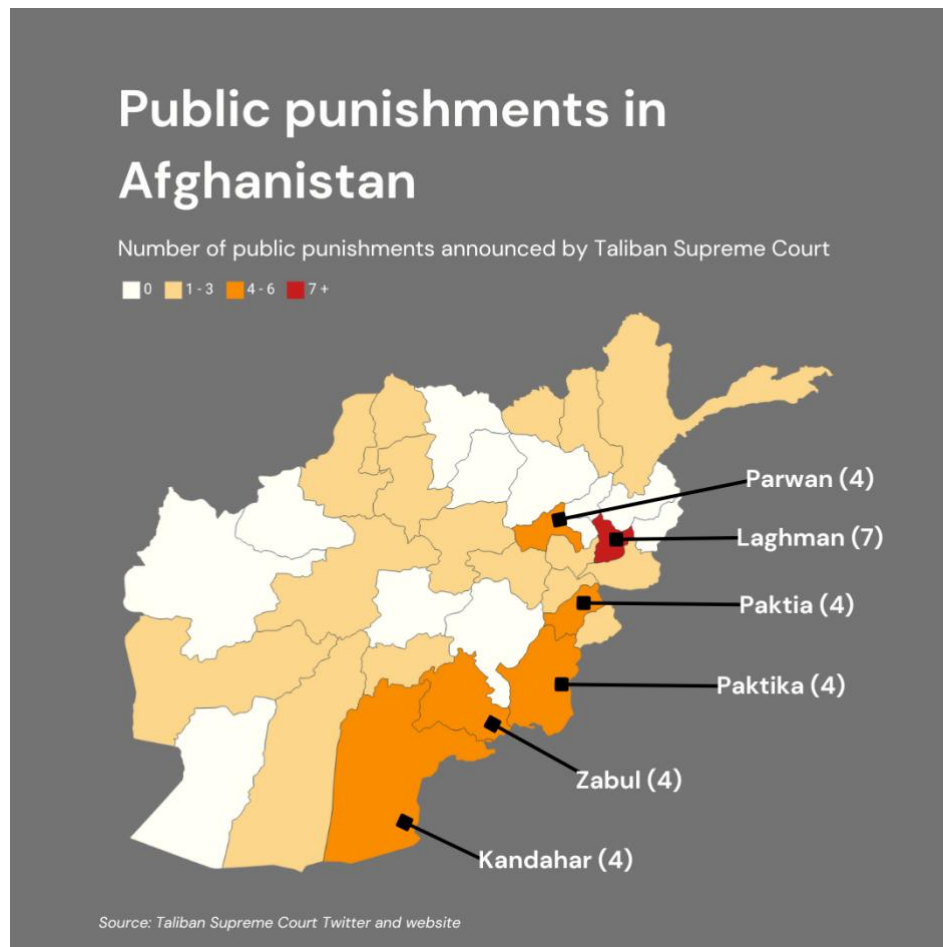


Figure 4: map showing the locations of public punishments announced by the Taliban Supreme Court between October 26, 2022 and August 4, 2023. These announcements have not been independently verified by AW. An Interactive map which is regularly updated is available [here](#).

In May 2023, the Taliban’s deputy of the Supreme Court, Abdul Malik Haqqani, announced in a video statement that since the group’s return to power, the court had issued 175 Qisās³, 37 stoning sentences and four sentences of a wall being collapsed onto perpetrators. According to Haqqani, the verdicts had been issued after the completion of the Taliban’s judicial processes, but some of the sentences had not yet been handed out.

² Number of public punishments announced by the Taliban Supreme Court between October 26, 2022 and August 4, 2023. Some public punishments have been reported by media or claimed by social media users, but have not been announced by the Taliban. This figure includes announced punishments only. AW has also recorded cases where those convicted have been pardoned.

³ Qisās is interpreted to mean retributive justice. In such cases, the victims’ family decides the punishment, which may involve either retaliation in kind, blood money or to forgive the perpetrator.

The majority of public punishments recorded by AW have so far been Ta'ziri⁴ (lashes), though two sentences of Qisās have been implemented, both on men accused of murder. The first execution took place in Farah province in December 2022, and the second in Laghman in June 2023, when an alleged Taliban member was publicly executed.

Despite claims on social media, at the time of publication, the Taliban has not officially announced any other forms of punishment being implemented, such as the amputation of limbs. The same day as the June execution, the Taliban released a statement emphasising due process in the application of public punishments and demanded that no punishments be implemented without a court order. The execution of the alleged Taliban member appears to be an attempt by the authorities to demonstrate that justice will indeed be applied to all.

Case study: visual evidence of lashing in Kandahar

While there have been regular announcements of public punishments, which have often been reported by Afghan media, visual evidence has so far been scarce. Overall, the Taliban appear to be successfully minimising the release of videos and photographs which would provide powerful and resonant imagery for campaigners to use against them. Sources on the ground have told AW that the Taliban have issued stringent restrictions around the photographing and recording of public punishment events.

So far, there has been just one video documenting the implementation of public punishment. The footage shows a lashing in Kandahar province in January 2023. A Supreme Court statement at the time claimed nine people were sentenced “*for the crimes of sodomy and theft*”. In the video, a Taliban fighter can be seen taking one of the men from the line, standing him up in front of the crowd, and flogging him at least ten times. The figure below shows the location and a large crowd of men attending the public punishment; highlighted in red is the Taliban fighter flogging the alleged criminal.

⁴ Ta'zir punishments – unlike Hudūd and Qisās – are not defined in the Quran or Sunna and are executed under the discretionary power of the judge. They may include lashings, prison, financial compensation or a combination of the above, and are considered “less severe” than Hudūd, which involves 80 or 100 lashes, as well as punishments such as the amputation of hands and feet or stoning.

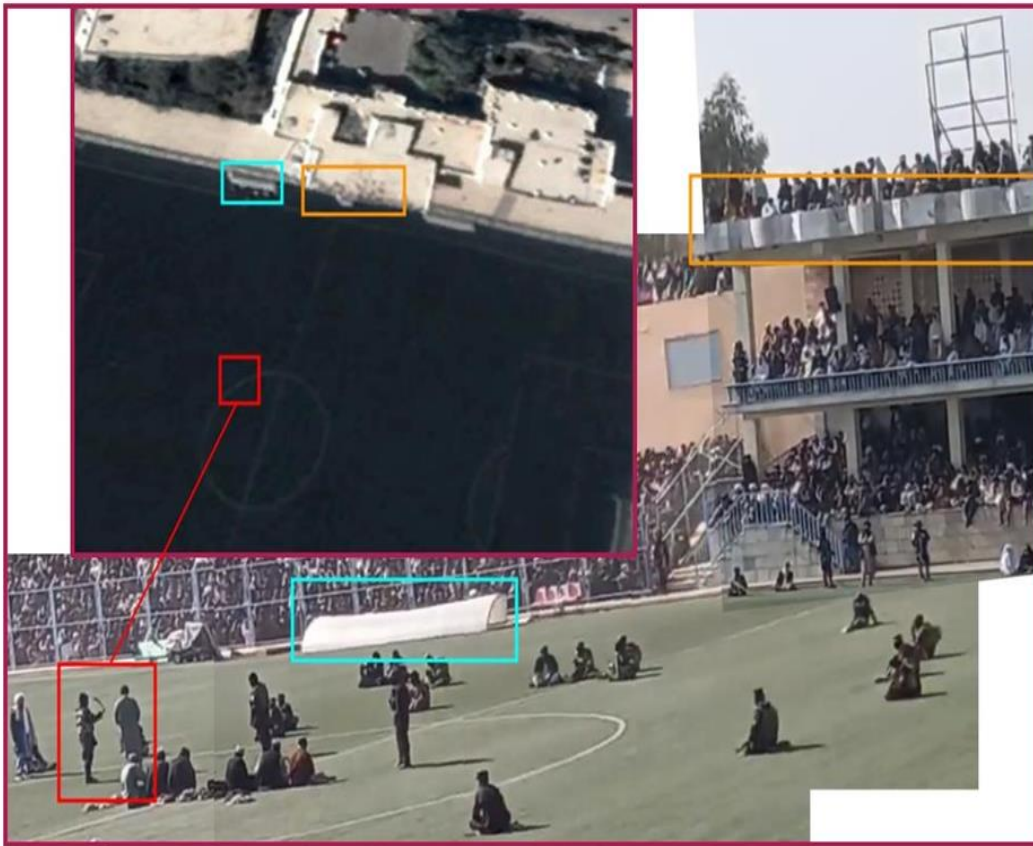


Figure 5: geolocation of the Ahmad Shahi stadium in Kandahar, where a large audience gathered to watch nine men receiving a public punishment by flogging in January 2023 [31.609952, 65.688366]

Section 2: rights of women and girls



Summary: the situation for women and girls in Afghanistan has continued to worsen since the Taliban's return to power. After an initial period of uncertainty and a more flexible approach negotiated in some areas, the group has issued nationwide restrictions on women's access to education, employment and public spaces, which have been linked to soaring mental health issues and almost-daily reports of suicide among women and girls. Meanwhile, a culture of impunity enabled by the Taliban's rule is thought to have driven an uptick in femicide cases and violence against women. Self-censorship and cultural sensitivities, coupled with a lack of independent institutions to investigate cases, often mean the possibility of tracing the perpetrators – and holding them accountable – is highly unlikely.

Increasing restrictions on women and girls

In their first press conference since taking control of Afghanistan, the Taliban provided little detail when probed on women's rights – revealing only that these rights would be respected "*within the framework of Islamic law*" and that women would be "*very active within our society*". Little over a month after they seized Kabul, female employees in the Kabul municipal government were instructed to stay home, however, with work permitted only for those who could not be replaced by men. An edict in December 2021 followed, with the Taliban

announcing that women should travel with a mahram⁵ on distances over 45 miles (72km). Girls' high schools have remained closed since the group's return to power, with authorities U-turning on a decision to reopen schools in March 2022.

2022 saw the Taliban's restrictions on women's rights intensify and official edicts become more frequent. Nationwide, they enforced mandatory face coverings for women – implemented to various degrees across provinces – and restricted access to spaces such as gyms and parks. In December 2022, despite restrictions already in place to segregate male and female students and limit the subjects female students could study, the Taliban announced a ban on women attending university. Days later, they issued a separate edict banning female NGO employees from working.

In July 2023, the Taliban ordered the closure of women's beauty salons – one of the few spaces where women had continued to work and meet one another. The announcement may reportedly lead to the loss of 60,000 jobs for women. In addition to these nationwide edicts, since the Taliban's return, there has also been a string of restrictions implemented at provincial levels, for example, gender segregation in restaurants and healthcare, though the extent to which these have been formally implemented remains unclear.



Figure 6: a timeline showing restrictions on women's rights implemented by the Taliban since their takeover.

⁵ A male family member chaperone.

Case study: Violence against female students at Badakhshan University as Taliban enforce hijab

Restrictions on education for women and girls has mobilised protests and triggered confrontations between female students and Taliban enforcers. For example, in October 2022, some female students were blocked from attending their lessons at Badakhshan University. The Taliban fighters responsible were reportedly from the Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice – the body responsible for issuing and enforcing the Taliban’s moral and religious edicts. The women were allegedly barred from entering the university for not adhering to the Taliban’s interpretation of the Islamic hijab. AW’s analysis of the various pieces of footage confirmed that only female students wearing black niqabs were allowed to enter the university gates that day, while students wearing colourful head coverings, face masks, or no coverings were refused entry.

A video shared online showed a large group of female students gathered outside the university gates, some hitting and kicking the gates as they demanded to be let in. Footage shows a Taliban fighter dressed in military uniform attempting to strike the gathered students with what appears to be a small whip or baton, then striking again at another group of students just seconds later.



Figure 7: sequence of events at the Badakhshan University gates. Female students hit the gates demanding to enter (left), while Taliban respond by striking them indiscriminately.

Femicide, violence against women and an environment of impunity

In May 2023, UN experts warned that the Taliban’s restrictions on women could lead to multiple preventable deaths that may amount to femicide. In a statement, the experts said that measures have reportedly contributed to a surge in the rates of child and forced marriage, as well as the proliferation of gender-based violence perpetrated with impunity.

Since January 2022, AW has been recording reports of women being individually killed, often in circumstances of extreme violence and brutality. These killings have allegedly been carried out by a range of actors, including family members, unknown perpetrators, and in some instances,

alleged Taliban members. Between January 15, 2022 and July 20, 2023, AW recorded 188 cases throughout the country. Reports included cases of women being brutally beheaded, shot and stabbed, with bodies often dumped in rivers or streets, sometimes reportedly showing signs of suffocation or torture.

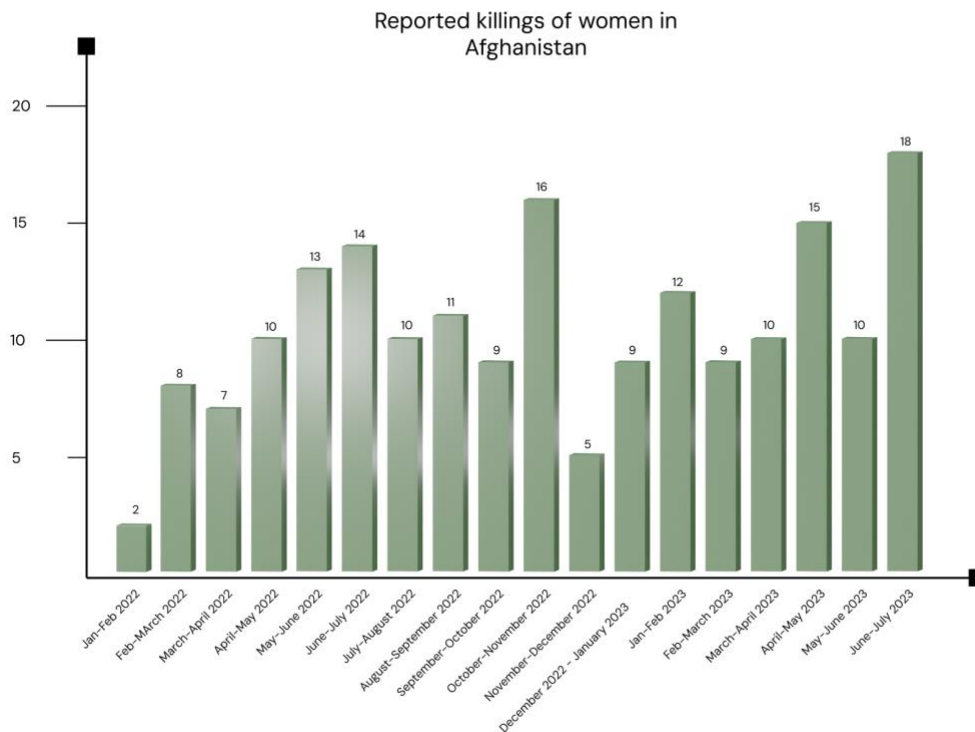


Figure 8: a graph showing the number of reported killings of women by Taliban, family members and unknown perpetrators between January 15, 2022 and July 20, 2023.

Many of these incidents are not verifiable due to insufficient open source evidence. However, this figure is likely also an undercount given the sensitivity of the topic and the cultural taboo, which means family members likely self-censor out of fear or shame. A report by Afghan media outlet *Etilaatroz* describes several reasons behind the culture of impunity that has prevailed under Taliban rule: a reluctance by the Taliban to follow up on cases where an investigation has not been requested by the family, and a lack of independent institutions to investigate incidents and enforce accountability. As a result, the newspaper points out that it is impossible to ascertain just how many women have been killed by Taliban fighters, their own family members, or unknown perpetrators.

The impact of Taliban restrictions on women’s mental health has been well documented by both media and human rights organisations. Multiple women AW has spoken to over the last two years have also stressed that they experience feelings of hopelessness and depression due to the restrictions on their access to work and education. Reports of suicides emerge almost daily

in Afghanistan. The head of one provincial hospital in Badakhshan province told Tolo News in May 2023 they had recorded 250 suicide attempts over the last year, including 188 cases among women and 62 among men. However, as with cases of femicide, suicides are also likely underreported due to cultural sensitivities and self-censorship among both the media and family members.

Cases of suicide among women have been linked to the lack of opportunities available, but also to gender-based violence. In July 2023 alone, there have been several reports of female suicides linked to domestic abuse or forced marriage. There have also been several cases reported by media where the cause of death – though reported as suicide – has been disputed. In July, a woman reportedly died after jumping from a building in Kabul, however, according to sources, the woman’s father claimed she had been killed by her husband and had not ended her own life.

Rights groups have also drawn attention to the potential risk of Taliban restrictions driving increasing domestic violence in Afghanistan. When the Taliban enforced mandatory face coverings for women in May 2022, the decree warned that the male relatives of women who failed to comply would be called in for questioning and could potentially be jailed or fined. At the time, Heather Barr, Associate Women’s Rights Director at Human Rights Watch (HRW), told Radio Free Europe that the decree “*essentially compels every Afghan man to become the jailer of his own female relatives*” and would likely “*increase domestic violence.*”

Afghanistan has always had high rates of gender-based violence, with 9 out of 10 women estimated to experience at least one form of intimate partner violence in their lifetime. Since the Taliban’s return however, services and institutions that were available to support survivors previously have been dismantled. In September 2021, the Taliban closed the Ministry of Women's Affairs and replaced it with the Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Women’s shelters were also shut after the group’s return. In March 2022, AW published a report based on interviews with former employees of several shelters, who said that in some cases, survivors were put into female prisons, sent back to abusive families, or can no longer be accounted for.

One interviewee was particularly concerned at the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan’s Independent Bar Association (AIBA) in November 2021 and its subsequent merging with the Ministry of Justice. The Taliban reportedly issued a directive which stripped the AIBA of powers to licence lawyers and instructed prior licence holders to re-apply to the Ministry of Justice. The interviewee added that the move will disproportionately restrict women’s “*access to justice*” in Afghanistan, at a time when women “*are more vulnerable than ever to domestic violence*”.

Section 3: freedom of civil society and the media



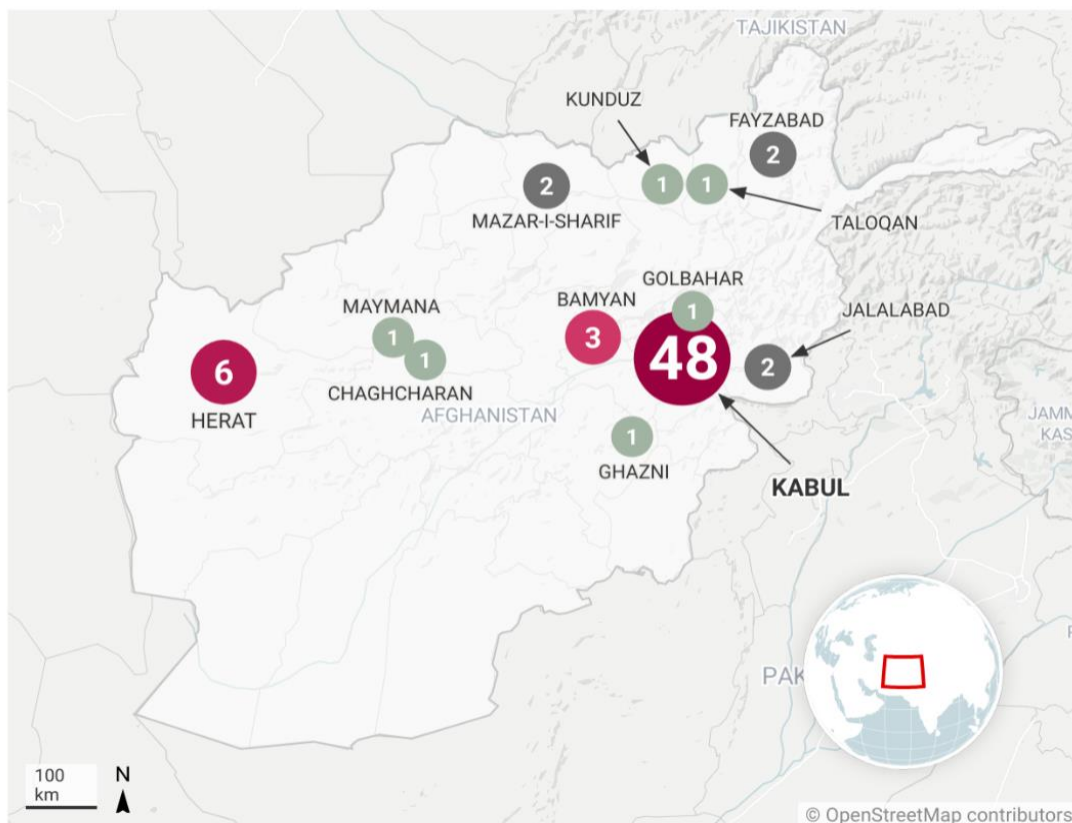
Summary: since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, female Afghan protesters and activists have carved out a notable presence in the eye of the international community. These women have taken to the streets to protest restrictions on their right to work, education and political participation. A trend of indoor demonstrations has also emerged, with protesters appearing to turn to indoor settings as a way to avoid potential violence or disruption from the Taliban. The women-led protest movement has been set against a backdrop of alleged arrests, not only of female protesters but also of educational campaigners and journalists. There has also been a significant shift in Afghanistan's media landscape: restrictions on the press have made it particularly difficult for journalists to hold the Taliban to account or investigate human rights concerns, which, coupled with widespread self-censorship and the reported closures of hundreds of outlets, has led to decreased visibility of the situation in the country.

Women-led protests, and the Taliban response

In early September 2021, the Taliban issued a decree banning demonstrations and the public display of any associated slogans that had not been pre-approved by the group, warning that permission must be secured before protests or those involved would face “*severe legal consequences*”. Despite the edict, AW has recorded and geolocated open source evidence of 69 separate women-led outdoor protests held against the Taliban since the group’s return to power – the first taking place on August 17, 2021, when armed Taliban surrounded a group of women holding hand-written placards in Kabul.

Women-led outdoor protests in Afghanistan

Number of verified women-led outdoor protests per Afghan city, between August 2021 and August 2023.



Map: Afghan Witness • Source: verified through content posted on news sites and social media • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 9: map showing number of women-led outdoor protests per city across Afghanistan between August 17, 2021 and August 9, 2023.

AW has verified [GRAPHIC] multiple instances of the Taliban using violence against female protesters, including the use of pepper spray, gunfire into the air, and water cannons to disrupt protesters. Most recently, AW confirmed the use of water cannons and gunfire into the air to disperse protesters demonstrating against the Taliban’s ban on women’s beauty salons announced in July 2023. These tactics were also used against female students following the ban on women’s university education in December 2022.



Figure 10: screenshots from footage posted on social media showing Taliban and firefighters using water cannons to disperse protesters on July 19, 2023.

A trend of indoor protests

Due to the risk associated with protesting on the streets, a trend of indoor protests has emerged since the Taliban takeover and was first picked up by AW analysts in November 2021. These demonstrations have been characterised by women filming themselves indoors, often with their faces covered and holding various slogans and messages on placards. Photos and videos of these protests are posted on social media or reported by Afghan news outlets almost daily, though due to their indoor settings, are not verifiable through techniques such as geolocation.

Between March 1, 2023 and June 27, 2023, AW recorded and analysed 95 separate women’s protests, including 84 indoor protests and 11 street demonstrations across 12 provinces in Afghanistan. It is worth noting that while outdoor protests have dropped in recent months, the number and geographic spread of indoor protests appears to be increasing, with more groups in

a broader range of locations choosing to participate. Most women-led protests have been clustered around several themes, including women's rights, gender-based violence, child marriages, and prison conditions, as well as a need for greater scrutiny of the Taliban and support and solidarity from the international community.

Arrests of female protesters

Since the takeover, there have been continued reports on the Taliban's arrests of female protesters, civil society activists and educational rights campaigners. AW has recorded 67 reports of civil society activists and protesters being arrested between January 15, 2022 and July 20, 2023. Several cases have attracted international media attention and triggered widespread condemnation of the Taliban, such as the case of Afghan women's rights activist and protester, Tamana Paryani, who was arrested in January 2022 after participating in a protest against the mandatory hijab in Kabul.

At the time, a video filmed by Paryani surfaced on social media, showing the activist inside her home and pleading for help as she alleges that Taliban fighters are at her door. At the time, an eyewitness told AP that the Taliban stormed the apartment in Kabul, smashing the door in and arresting the activist and her three sisters. Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid denied any women were being held, but his interview with AFP provoked further concern when he claimed authorities had the right "*to arrest and detain dissidents or those who break the law*".

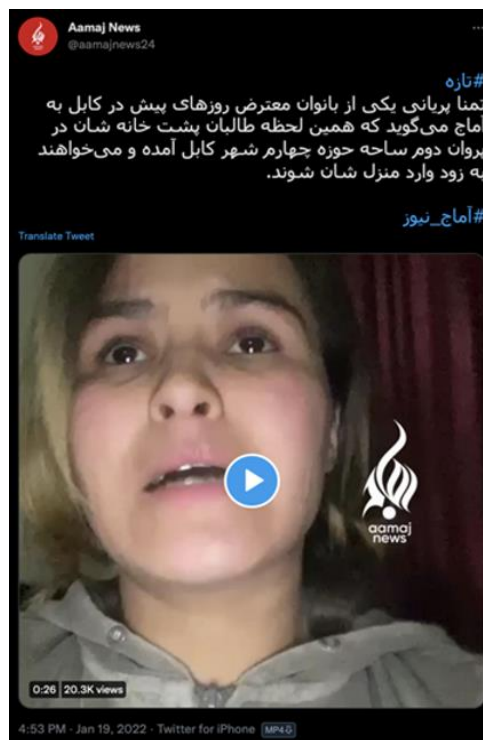


Figure 11: screenshot of an Aamaj News post featuring the video posted by Tamana Paryani.

Education campaigners detained, foreign NGO programmes suspended

It is not just female protesters who have been targeted by the Taliban. In March 2023, the arrest of educational rights campaigner and PenPath founder, Matiullah Wesa – still thought to be in detention – sparked concern among the UN and other bodies. Wesa’s case followed the reported arrest of Professor Ismail Mashal in February 2023. Mashal was an outspoken critic of the Taliban's ban on education for women and was reportedly arrested in Kabul while handing out free books. He was allegedly freed on March 5 but has not spoken out since – a recurring theme among activists and campaigners arrested and then released by the Taliban. Some female activists previously told AW they were forced to sign agreements prior to their release, which stated they would cease their activism and not speak about their experiences in Taliban detention.

The Taliban have also issued several restrictions on civil society organisations, in what appears to be an attempt to curb organisations and initiatives they perceive as alternative influences. Following a ban on female NGO workers in December 2022, in early June 2023, they reportedly ordered foreign NGOs and charities including UNICEF, Save the Children, and ACTED to suspend their educational programmes in Afghanistan. These gradual restrictions on NGO organisations, coupled with the move against domestic educational rights activists and the drive to open madrassas nationwide, highlight the importance the Taliban place on control over the education sector.

An erosion of press freedom

At a press conference just days after the takeover, Zabihullah Mujahid reassured journalists that the Taliban “*are committed to media within our cultural frameworks*”. He reiterated “*the media should be impartial*” adding that “[*t*]hey [*the media*] can critique our work, so that we can improve.” Just weeks later, images emerged online of two journalists from *Etilaatroz* newspaper with welts and bruises on their bodies. The journalists alleged they were beaten, detained and flogged by the Taliban after attempting to cover protests in Kabul. In the months following the takeover, AW verified several instances of journalists being threatened, arrested and attacked in various provinces, mostly as they attempted to cover women’s rights protests.

There have been regular claims of journalists and media workers being detained. Between January 15, 2022 and July 20, 2023, AW recorded 98 reports of journalists, photographers and media commentators being detained by the Taliban across Afghanistan. Other organisations have documented higher figures when considering a broader range of abuses. The Afghanistan Journalist Centre (AFJC) stated in May 2023 that it had documented a total of at least 213 incidents of violence, threats, and detentions of journalists since the last World Press Freedom

Day on May 3, 2022 – including 19 injuries claimed by ISKP, who in March targeted journalists as they gathered at a Shia, Iranian-affiliated centre in Mazar-i-Sharif, Balkh province, to celebrate National Journalists’ Day.

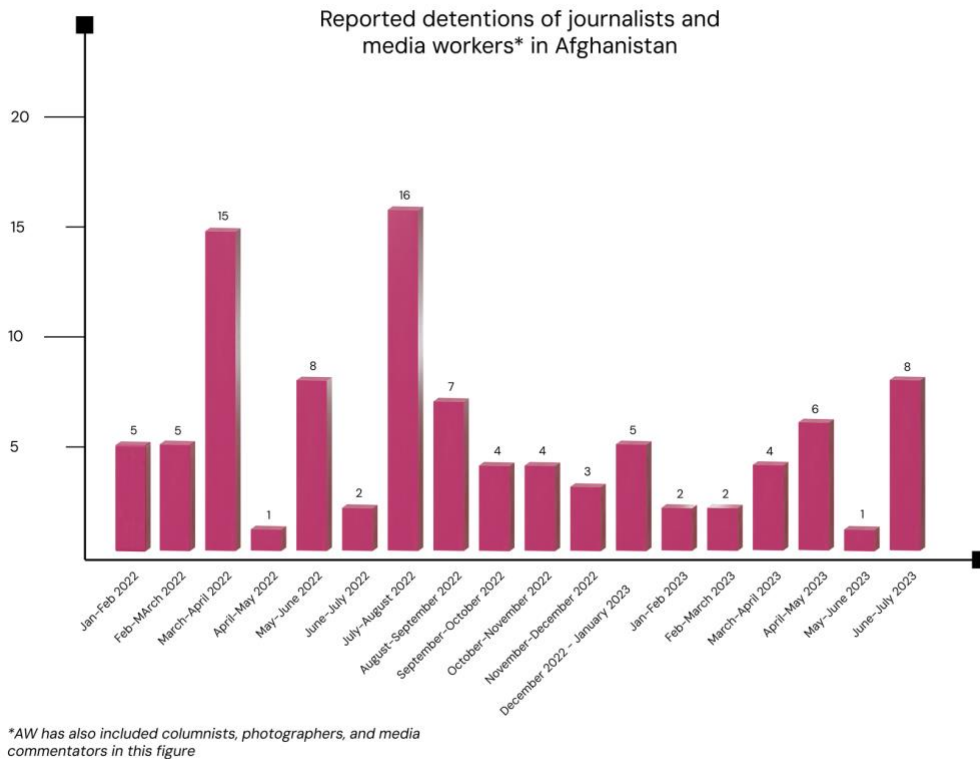


Figure 12: a graph showing the number of reported detentions of journalists and media workers in Afghanistan per reporting period, between January 15, 2022 and July 20, 2023.

Restrictions on media and widespread self-censorship

Afghanistan’s media landscape has changed significantly since the Taliban’s return. Restrictions on the press, coupled with the economic impact of the group’s takeover, have led to mass closures of media outlets and many journalists leaving the country out of fear of reprisal or violence. Self-censorship is likely widespread, with topics such as women’s rights and human rights particularly challenging – and now more dangerous – to report on.

Outlets and journalists who remain in the country must navigate a string of restrictions – in some provinces, media organisations have been instructed to only publish Taliban-approved content, while nationwide, international media outlets such as the *BBC* have been banned from broadcasting in local languages.

Some journalists report limited access to government information or scenes of security incidents, and female journalists face increased challenges when reporting due to restrictions on their work and freedom of movement. AW's recent research into technology-facilitated gender-based violence found that as a result of online harassment, female journalists reported having less access to online sources and information compared to their male counterparts.

These factors combined have led to a shrinking information space in the country, making it difficult for both ordinary citizens and international organisations to monitor events and access reliable sources of information.



Figure 13: a timeline of the Taliban's restrictions on media and journalists since the group's takeover.

Section 4: human rights violations against vulnerable and marginalised groups



363
incidents
recorded

involving vulnerable or marginalised groups in Afghanistan

This category includes incidents and reports involving discrimination against marginalised or vulnerable groups in Afghanistan, such as targeted attacks, arbitrary detentions and killings, house-to-house searches, violence, forced displacement and land disputes, announced restrictions and the ousting of employees based on factors such as ethnicity or religion.

Summary: Hazara communities have historically faced persecution and discrimination in Afghanistan, but have experienced increasing uncertainty since the Taliban's return to power. Despite the Taliban's promise of security for all Afghans, in the first year of the group's rule, Hazara and Shia neighbourhoods were regularly targeted by ISKP. There have also been widespread allegations of Taliban abuses against Hazaras, including killings, detentions and forced displacements in Afghanistan's Hazarajat⁶ region. AW has also recorded claims of government employees, university professors and judges being ousted from their roles based on their ethnicity, as well as Taliban restrictions directed at religious minorities.

⁶ A region of central Afghanistan which comprises the provinces of Bamyan and Daykundi, as well as several adjacent districts in the provinces of Ghazni, Uruzgan, Wardak, Parwan, Baghlan, Samangan and Sar-e Pul.

Multiple attacks targeting Hazaras and Shias

In October 2021, after two separate attacks were committed against Shia worshippers in Kunduz and Kandahar, the Taliban Interior Ministry spokesperson, Saeed Khosty, said that the Taliban would ensure security for religious minorities in Afghanistan. Despite this, attacks on Hazara and Shia communities continued throughout the first year of the Taliban’s rule, with mosques, schools and religious celebrations targeted. During the two years of Taliban rule, AW records show that ISKP have claimed 29 attacks on Hazaras and Shias, resulting in the deaths of 193 people and 454 injured, according to media reports.

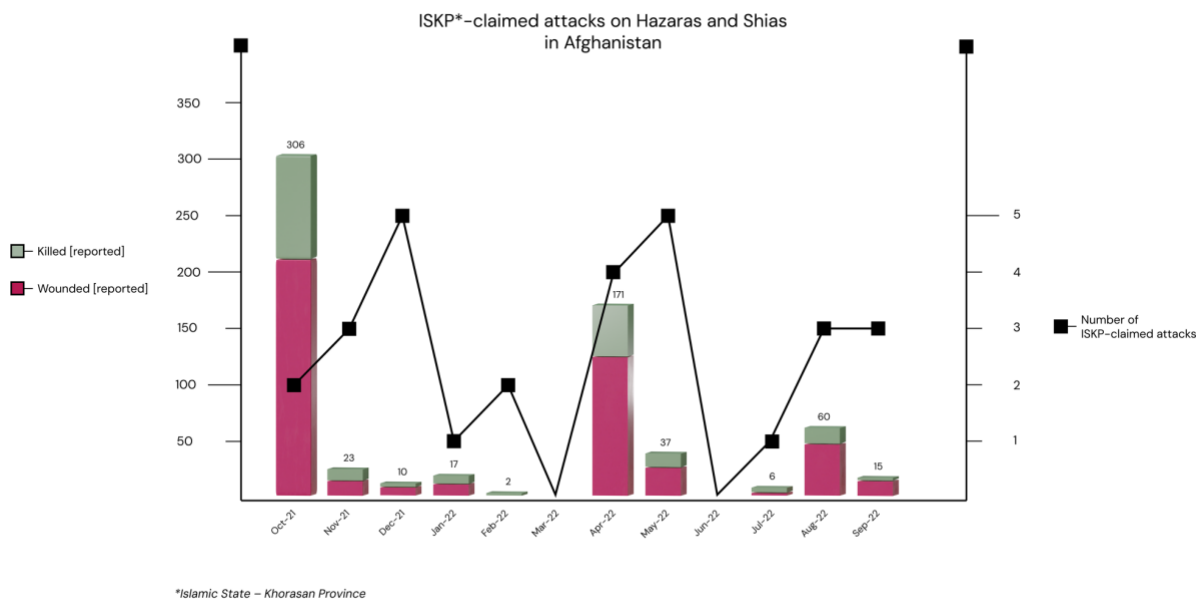


Figure 14: a graph showing the number of ISKP-claimed attacks on Hazara and Shia communities and the resulting casualties since the Taliban’s takeover. There have been no ISKP attacks on Hazara or Shia targets since September 2022.⁷

The deadly attacks on mosques in Kunduz and Kandahar in October 2021, both targeting Shia worshippers, were followed by a spate of ISKP attacks on Hazara and Shia neighbourhoods in Kabul in November and December. On April 21, 2022, the IS affiliate targeted a Shia mosque – predominantly frequented by Hazaras – located in central Mazar-i-Sharif, Balkh province, and

⁷ The above graph excludes an ISKP-claimed attack which targeted journalists at the Shia, Iranian-affiliated Tebyan Cultural Centre in Mazar-i-Sharif in March 2023. This attack is mentioned under ‘The Erosion of Press Freedom’ section on page 24.

just over a week later, a double explosion targeted two minivans allegedly carrying Hazara Shia passengers, also in Mazar-i-Sharif.

There have been several major unclaimed attacks targeting an education centre and schools in the Hazara and Shia dominated Dasht-e-Barchi neighbourhood in western Kabul – an area which has been targeted by ISKP in the past. Multiple explosions targeted a boys' school in April 2022, while an attack on the Kaaj Education Centre in September 2022 reportedly killed more than 50 people and injured dozens, with significant casualties among female students who were sitting exams at the time. The attacks bore hallmarks of ISKP, but remain unclaimed.

Since the Taliban's takeover, ISKP have claimed five attacks specifically targeting Shia and Hazara civilians at locations along the Shaheed Mazari road, near to where the education centre is located. Taking into consideration two additional unclaimed attacks, the Kaaj attack marked the eighth in the area and triggered a wave of protests led by Hazara women in Kabul, Balkh, Herat and Bamyan in the days following.

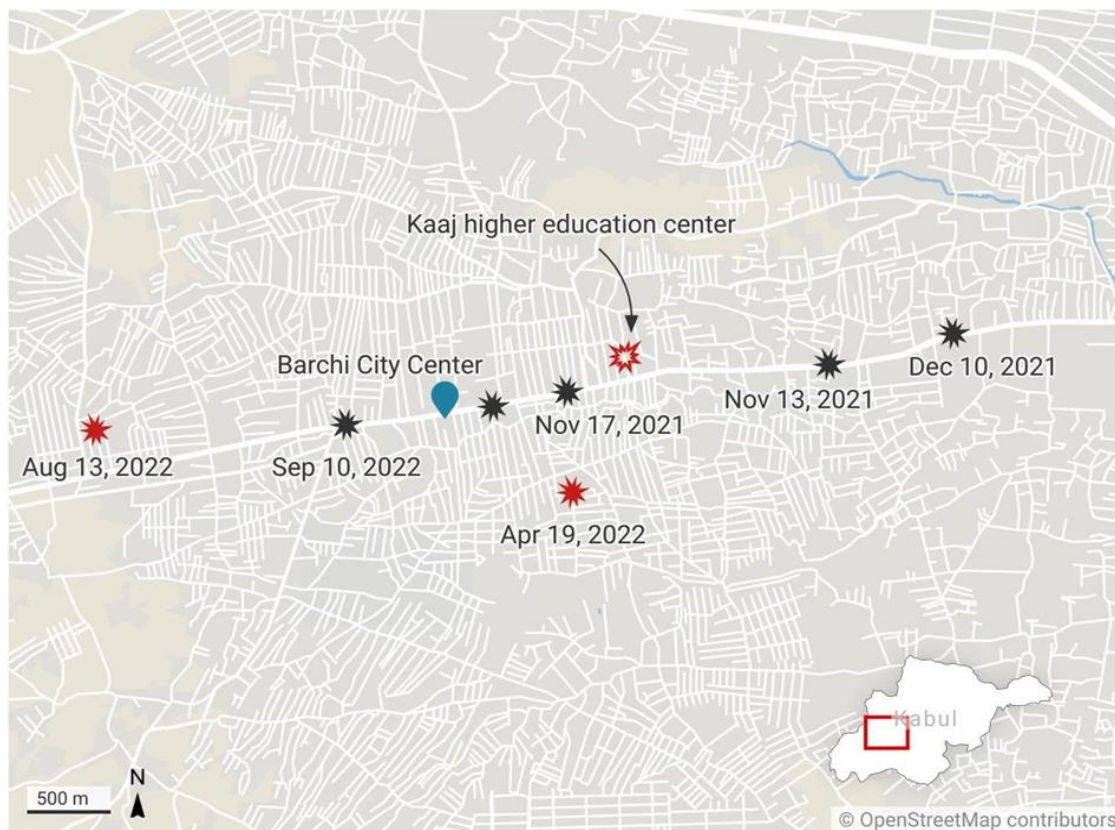


Figure 15: map overview of ISKP-claimed explosions [black] and unclaimed explosions [red] along or near the Shaheed Mazari Road in PD6 and PD13, in the Dasht-e Barchi area of western Kabul.

In early September 2022, Human Rights Watch highlighted not only the systematic nature of attacks against Hazara and Shia communities in Afghanistan, but a lack of security measures by the Taliban to protect them. This is in addition to the removal of resources for the communities to protect themselves. Since the attack on the Kaaj Education Centre, AW has

seen a drop-off in attacks on minority targets. ISKP appear to have shifted from regular civilian attacks to less frequent attacks focused on Taliban targets, with several high-profile assassinations and an attack on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kabul in early 2023. In addition to this trend, a series of raids conducted by the Taliban against alleged IS cells in March and April 2023 corresponded with a reduced number of attacks.

Reports of Hazara killings, detentions and forced displacement

As well as facing attacks by ISKP, there have also been widespread claims of Hazaras being killed or detained by the Taliban, and several reports of raids allegedly targeting Hazara civilians, including minors. In November 2022, at least eight civilians, including four children, were reportedly killed by the Taliban in the Hazara-dominated province of Daykundi. The Taliban claimed "*armed rebels*" had been targeted in the raid, though this was disputed by local sources, who said the Taliban also wounded four civilians and detained several others. Amnesty International released an investigation into a similar incident in September 2022, reporting that Taliban fighters killed six Hazara people – including one woman and a 12-year-old girl – during a night raid in Ghor province. The human rights organisation said it documented similar killings of Hazara people in Ghazni province in July 2021, and Daykundi province in August 2021.

There have also been widespread reports of the Taliban carrying out forced displacements of Hazara communities. In October 2021, it was reported that thousands of people were forced from their homes and land, with many evictions targeting members of the Shia Hazara community. At the time, Human Rights Watch logged forced evictions in five provinces, including Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan in the south, Daykundi in the centre, and in the north, Balkh. Regular reports of forced displacements of Hazara families have also been recorded by AW. AW has geolocated footage purporting to show the demolition of homes in Hazara communities in Kabul in June 2022, as well as footage in November 2022 showing Hazara residents loading their belongings into trucks in Ghor province, allegedly after their forced displacement by the Taliban. These incidents are often based on long-running and complex land disputes with Hazara communities often the ones to lose out.

Alleged discrimination and restrictions on religious minorities

Despite initial claims by the Taliban that their caretaker government would be "*inclusive*", judges, university professors and government employees claim they have been ousted from various roles based on their ethnicity. As of June 2023, AW has only been able to verify 4 Hazara individuals in senior leadership positions, 5 Uzbeks and 15 Tajiks, as opposed to 137 Pashtuns. Non-Pashtuns that previously held government positions have largely been let go.

In January 2022, a report emerged claiming the “*mass removal*” of Hazara judges and judicial employees who had been employed under the former government. While it was essentially part of a clear out of the judiciary, it disproportionately impacted Hazaras. A month later, it was reported that the Taliban had dismissed non-Pashtun employees from the General Directorate of Oil and Gas in Kabul and unlawfully dismissed the chancellor and vice-chancellor of Bاميان University. In April 2022, a report claimed that Abdullah Safi, the Taliban representative at Balkh University, terminated the employment of 50 professors mainly based on their ethnicity. At the time, a list containing the names of all the dismissed faculty members was shared by a journalist on Twitter, with a civil activist in Balkh province also confirming the news to AW.

Additionally, there have been regular claims of the Taliban implementing restrictions on religious minorities in Afghanistan. In April 2023, multiple reports claimed that the Taliban instructed Shias to celebrate Eid on the same day as Sunnis. In July, restrictions on Shia communities were reportedly implemented across the country ahead of the month of Muharram and the religious ceremony of Ashura. This allegedly sparked clashes between Taliban fighters and worshippers in Kabul. There have also been reports of the Taliban detaining and killing members of the Salafist⁸ community, as well as raids and closures of mosques, madrassas and religious seminaries.

⁸ *Salafism is a branch of Sunni Islam and is based on the idea that the most authentic and true Islam is found in the lived example of the early, righteous generations of Muslims, known as the Salaf, who were closest in both time and proximity to the Prophet Muhammad.*

Final remarks

This report aims to shed light on the extent of claimed HRVs surfacing from Afghanistan through open source. During the first two years of the Taliban's rule, AW has collected thousands of claims of human rights abuses relating to infringements of the right to life, right to freedom from torture, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, women's rights, and more. The scale and scope of these claims – which, given the limits of open source techniques, self-censorship and capacity for access to information on the ground, only ever represent a portion of incidents in the country – iterates just how challenging the reality of life in Afghanistan is, two years after the Taliban's return to power.

Monitoring these claims has flagged trends such as alleged reprisals against former security forces, regular public punishments issued by the Taliban-led Supreme Court, and gender-based violence, including a pattern of violent killings of women being reported. These alleged violations are a stark contrast to the promises made by the Taliban following their takeover, such as a general amnesty granted to those linked to the former government, and assurances of women's rights and press freedom.

As mentioned, AW is aware of the limits of open source monitoring. There are many factors stifling the information environment in Afghanistan, including fear of reprisal, widespread self-censorship, cultural sensitivities around certain topics, and restrictions on the media. There are also challenges to verifying information, with a lack of visual evidence available in many cases. With this in mind, open source data should be used in conjunction with other mechanisms that are in place to monitor the situation – such as on-the-ground reports by NGOs and international organisations, as well as reporting by the media.

These sorts of collaborative efforts – another area of focus for Afghan Witness in addition to our monitoring – where Afghan and international organisations work to share skill sets and techniques, swap information, limit duplicated efforts and work together on collaborative investigations or other types of projects, is key. A cohesive information environment supports transparency and, ultimately, the potential for both domestic and international accountability.