Instead of Politicizing Afghanistan, Stand Up for Women and Girls

By Lisa Curtis
A human rights calamity is unfolding in Afghanistan. In its latest move to repress half of the country’s population, the Taliban mandated that Afghan women can no longer work for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). The United Nations (U.N.) condemned the Taliban for forcing the international organization to make an “appalling choice” between continuing its operations without employing Afghan women, which would violate the U.N. charter, or withdrawing from the country, which would deepen the humanitarian crisis. Following a U.N.-led international meeting in Doha in early May, U.N. Secretary General António Guterres signaled that the U.N. would likely continue operating in Afghanistan despite the harsh Taliban edict. This follows several other outrageous Taliban edicts, including keeping girls out of secondary school and young women from attending university; preventing women from leaving their homes without a male companion; and prohibiting women from going to parks or gyms or holding jobs, except in the health sector.

Yet rather than stand up for Afghan women and girls in the face of such repressive policies, American leaders—Republicans and Democrats alike—are busy in a blame game about which political party is responsible for the U.S. failure in Afghanistan. Republican congressional leaders have held hearings on Afghanistan that focus on the Biden administration’s poor handling of the August 2021 withdrawal but largely ignore what is happening to women and girls in the country. One exception to Republican leaders’ inaction on the plight of Afghan women was Congressman Mike McCaul’s chairing of a roundtable on the issue that featured remarks by former Afghan Ambassador Roya Rahmani. For its part, the Biden administration recently published a review of the Afghan withdrawal that laid blame on the Trump administration for the Biden administration’s own failures. For instance, the Biden administration chose to bind itself to the Trump-era Doha deal made between the United States and the Taliban that called for U.S. troop withdrawal by May 2021. The Biden administration could have delayed a troop withdrawal and negotiated a harder bargain with the Taliban. The administration would better serve American interests by focusing on implementing policies that support women and girls, like conditioning engagement with the Taliban on the reopening of schools and universities to women.

Meanwhile, the women of Afghanistan are bravely standing up for themselves, despite the risks. Based on reporting by local journalists, contacts with Afghanistan-based protesters, and communication with the global Afghan diaspora community, Center for a New American Security researchers documented 86 women-led protests since September 2021. Most recently on April 29, dozens of Afghan women protested in the streets of Kabul against a U.N.-led meeting in Doha to discuss how the international community should engage the Taliban. Due to the Taliban’s harsh crackdown, 32 of these demonstrations were held indoors, with protestors getting their message out through videos, social media, and web postings.

Statements from the international community condemning the Taliban for its crackdown on women have been clear and forthright. In March, the head of UNAMA announced that Afghanistan is the most repressive country in the world for women and that the Taliban has moved to systematically erase women from public life. But statements are not enough. The international community must act, including by penalizing the Taliban.

The False Choice between Countering Terrorism and Supporting Women

U.S. policymakers must not believe in the false choice that either the United States supports human rights or it pursues its counterterrorism objectives. The two issues are directly linked. The worse the Taliban treats women and girls, the greater the likelihood that Afghanistan becomes a locus of extremist ideologies and terrorism once again. Moreover, high-level U.S. engagement with Taliban leaders under the current circumstances only serves to strengthen the Taliban’s narrative that it is a legitimate power that has conquered its enemies and is therefore entitled to flout international norms and violate the rights of the Afghan people.

Seeking to engage the Taliban on terrorism while ignoring what it is doing to women is shortsighted. While the United States and the Taliban both oppose the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP)—which has conducted multiple terrorist attacks in the country in the last several years—this alone does not mean that Washington should rush to engage the Taliban or has much to gain by doing so. First, the Taliban will fight ISKP on its own, with or without U.S. assistance. Second, the Taliban remains closely allied with al Qaeda; the U.N. Security Council Sanctions Monitoring Team noted in its February 2023 report that the two groups have an “ongoing and cooperative relationship.” Third, the Taliban is opening new madrasas (religious schools) and implementing new curriculum that teaches young men about its radical brand of Islam, thus breeding a new generation of extremists, many of whom are likely to become terrorists. Rather than using limited U.S. leverage to encourage the Taliban to act against ISKP terrorists, which they will do of their own volition, U.S. officials should focus their attention, resources, and diplomacy on seeking improvement in the treatment of women and girls.

Don’t Give Up on Protecting Afghan Women

While the United States and international community may be unable to immediately impact Taliban decision-making on policies toward women and girls, they should still attempt to do so. They should condition engagement with Taliban leaders on their treatment of women and girls and impose further human rights sanctions on them. They should also increase engagement with political opposition leaders and expatriate Afghans who support women’s rights. It is encouraging that State Department Special Representative for Afghanistan Tom West traveled to Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey to meet Afghan civil society leaders, journalists, humanitarian workers, and human rights activists in mid-April. In addition, Washington should reopen the Afghanistan embassy in Washington and allow Afghan diplomats from the previous Islamic Republic regime to run it. This will put pressure on the Taliban, which still craves international recognition and legitimacy. Finally, Washington should shred the Doha deal made between the United States and the Taliban during the Trump administration, which paved the way for a U.S. troop withdrawal in exchange for Taliban counterterrorism reassurances. Discarding this agreement would help deny the Taliban legitimacy at a time when it is committing gross human rights violations.

Pressuring the Taliban to change course on its policies toward women and girls will not only demonstrate that the United States still stands up for its values and principles, but it will also help dampen support for extremism and prevent the resurgence of terrorism in the region and beyond.
Women-led Protests in Afghanistan Since Taliban Takeover by Province

**Total number of protests across Afghanistan**
- **54** outdoor protests
- **32** virtual protests

**Focus of Protest Issues**
Most protests focused on women’s rights generally, although some singled out issues like lack of access to education, employment, and food. A handful of protests criticized the international community’s inaction toward their plight. The most recent protest on April 29 was unique in that it centered on opposition to international recognition of the Taliban.

**Number of Women-led Human Rights Protests in Afghanistan Since Taliban Took Control**

- **Six months after they took over the country, Taliban leaders began to systematically roll back women’s rights.**
- **At the one-year anniversary of the Taliban takeover, Afghan women sought to bring global attention to the Taliban’s repressive policies.**

*Each protest and demonstration happened in different places and times. Some may have occurred on the same date, but different places.*
Protest Map Methodology

Jan Mohammad Jahid, a researcher with CNAS’ Indo-Pacific Security team, collected data on protests from reporting by local journalists, contact with Afghanistan-based protestors, and communication with the global Afghan diaspora community. The protests included a range from 10 to 400 participants—with most protests between 10 and 30. Thirty-two of the 86 protests documented were small, private gatherings of women and girls who shared their messages virtually; these are included since women face grave danger from the Taliban authorities if they protest in the streets. Under the extremely oppressive conditions for women, even participating in indoor protests carries risk of punishment by the Taliban. For more information on protest sources, please visit https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/afghanistan-commentary.