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Taliban Arms Management Practices

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KEY FINDINGS

- Since taking control of Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban have attempted to monitor and control small arms at the national level. They have not, however, developed any major new policies on these areas. Instead, the Taliban have continued to use the existing policies and procedures implemented under the previous Government of the Republic of Afghanistan, making modifications as needed.
- The Taliban's capacity to control and manage stockpiles has increased over time, with weapons in the major bases largely kept secure. Personal connections, however, trump rules and procedures: influential commanders can often obtain weapons without following formal approval procedures.
- An additional challenge for the Taliban is that many commanders refuse to register weapons they possessed before August 2021. Commanders and fighters generally view such weapons as personal property, rather than that of the Taliban or the state.
- Power dynamics within the Taliban at the subnational level shape the management of weapons, which varies considerably from province to province. While the Taliban can act in a unified manner in certain circumstances, its central authorities tend to leave much of the day-to-day running of affairs to the local officials—both for political reasons and due to capacity issues.

Context

Almost two years after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the country faces multiple, overlapping crises and growing humanitarian needs. The Taliban, initially unprepared for the consequences of their military seizure of the country, have sought to strengthen their governance. They have broadly focused on securing and consolidating positions, preventing internal rifts (or at least the appearance of disunity), securing aid, and gaining international political recognition; however, tensions between competing factions within the Taliban, and pockets of conflict with armed opposition groups, such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), have presented concerns about stability and security.

Several dynamics impact the Taliban's ability to both make and implement policy. A key factor is the movement's inability to develop consistent or coherent policy positions on critical issues. The decision-making apparatus is not always consistent, and policies are implemented in an iterative fashion to respond to emerging challenges. The Taliban consequently work with the existing practices and rules that date back to the era of the Republic of Afghanistan, as long as there are no major objections to the substance of these policies.

Where major objections exist to some of these policies within Afghanistan, such as those related to female education, views also tend to be sharply divided about what should be done. In these instances, the emir has often made a unilateral decision that everyone is expected to obey. This is often not the case in practice, however, especially when unpopular policies collide with the realities of local politics. An example of this dynamic is the uneven application of the edicts on female education, and explains why many girls continue to attend secondary school with the full knowledge and

tacit approval of local Taliban officials. In addition, internal struggles over power, status, and resources also shape the degree to which central-level policies are obeyed.

Similar dynamics exist with small arms control and need to be taken into account when analysing the Taliban's efforts to register, regulate, and control small arms in the country.

Taliban national arms management policies and practices

When the Taliban took power, significant caches of US-procured Republic weapons were left behind.¹ One Taliban official publicly claimed that the movement took possession of more than 300,000 light arms, 26,000 heavy weapons, and about 61,000 military vehicles during the takeover of the country,² but these figures have yet to be further refined.³ The movement, in any case, had initially almost no capacity, or system in place, to manage any weapons, including the ones it seized.

Since then, the Taliban have tried to gain greater control over the proliferation and management of weapons but have not revealed any details of their overall approach or guiding principles, or how their efforts have evolved since August 2021. To assess actual policies and practices and their evolution, the Centre on Armed Groups conducted extensive field research in Afghanistan on behalf of the Small Arms Survey.⁴

In fact, the Taliban have not developed any new overarching arms control and management policy or system countrywide. Prior to its takeover of the country, the movement had no centralized system of weapons management during the insurgency:

1 It is estimated that over USD 7 billion worth of Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) equipment was left behind (SIGAR, 2022, p. 33).

2 See Al Jazeera (2022).

3 Later in 2023, the Survey will publish a consolidated report on arms transfers to Afghanistan from 2002 to 2021.

4 The Situation Update draws on a combination of methods, including existing data and background information, particularly regarding the evolution of Taliban policies gathered by the authors. Between October and December 2022, researchers conducted a total of 64 interviews with Afghan key informants, including Taliban government officials, commanders and fighters, customary authorities, and weapons smugglers.

unit commanders were responsible for keeping track of weapons, but their distribution was informal, and not centralized.⁵ Once in power, the Taliban continued to rely on pre-existing structures, procedures, and policies, as well as, to some extent, the remaining Republic personnel.

In practice, Taliban policies and positions are driven by several objectives, most notably securing greater control over their ranks. The Taliban are still transforming their insurgency forces into coherent state security forces, an ongoing process that started with the dismantling of the *mahaz* system.⁶ The formal system provides clearer accountability chains—at least in theory—which are roughly similar to those existing during the Republic. For example, in the Ministry of Defence (MoD), squad leaders report to platoon leaders (with platoons consisting of roughly 100 to 150 people), who are in turn under the command of the company leader. In the Ministry of Interior (Mol), each unit has sub-units and sub-sub-units. The Mol also has different provincial-level units as well as special forces under its command.

Another factor influencing arms control efforts is the central authorities' desire to prevent splits within the movement and to maintain an image of unity. The unregulated control of small arms could lead certain actors with local authority to accumulate stockpiles, which could then be used to support—or mount—a rebellion.⁷ Contrary to past practices, the Taliban are distributing weapons in a more restricted way. Arms may be distributed during security forces training (though army and police recruits are often expected to bring their own weapons, which are then registered); when forces are located in or deployed to conflict areas, at which point either the Mol or the MoD may issue weapons; and when commanders issue weapons to their fighters. In this last case, which typically requires a substantial justification, top commanders—such as the provincial chief

of police—may distribute a limited number of weapons.⁸

The Taliban are struggling to achieve their objectives, however, for two main reasons. The first is a lack of institutional capacity and know-how. This is exemplified by the fact that many records are kept on paper, instead of being digitized. Taliban officials have also not been trained—at least not in the same way as Republic officials were—to carry out their duties. Some former Republic officials are still involved in weapons management and seem to be largely responsible for ensuring adherence to process, and for completing relevant paperwork.

The second reason lies with the internal divisions and tensions noted above. Many fighters are simply unwilling to register their weapons because they consider them to be personal property, rather than of the state or the Taliban. Additionally, local management only works if local authorities can enforce full compliance. The only unit that appears to have a proper weapons registration system is the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI). Meanwhile, the Mol and MoD are struggling to develop systems and to get their forces to comply, as a result of personal, political, structural, and economic obstacles.

In sum, while general policies exist at the ministerial level, practice varies from province to province, with no centralized policy across the security agencies.

Management of weapon stocks in bases and depots

The Taliban appear to have carried out a comprehensive cataloguing of weapons previously held in Republic depots. Following the events of

5 Some exceptions occurred, most notably with the elite units (interview with Taliban officials, Kabul, 6 December 2022).

6 *Mahaz* were larger fighting groups prominent during the insurgency, each commanding a set of smaller units known as *delgai* (with anywhere between 3 and 20 fighters). Some *delgai* have not been integrated into units within the government system, making it unclear where accountability lies. For more on the history of these structures, see Jackson and Amiri (2019).

7 This partly drove the decision to dismantle the more powerful *mahaz* units, some of which, if provoked, could have presented a considerable challenge to the central authorities.

8 For example, some imams in Kunduz received weapons for their protection following ISKP attacks on mosques (interview with Taliban official, Kunduz, 14 December 2022).

August 2021, they promptly began registering weapons and ammunition in existing depots—typically through handwritten lists. The Mol Department of Technical Affairs, created during the Republic and retained by the Taliban, is currently responsible for weapons management. The department relies largely on the Republic-era policies, and has representatives in each battalion and platoon.

The implementation of these policies has faced some challenges. While the Taliban tend to have greater control over stockpiles in major bases, lists are generally only kept on paper. In addition, one source remarked that some weapons storage facilities were initially kept unlocked.⁹ At Kunduz airport, for example, it is estimated that about 6,000–7,000 weapons went missing in the early days following the Taliban takeover.¹⁰

Challenges have included staffing and capacity issues. Republic-era staff were initially ordered to stay, to ensure the continuity of systems and procedures for weapons management. They were not paid, however, and many eventually left, with some time lag before being replaced. Once active, however, their replacements had less understanding of Republic-era systems, and no knowledge of weapons management in general.

Stockpile management has nonetheless improved over time. Facilities are now generally locked, and some degree of weapons' maintenance is conducted. Delegations from Kabul have carried out regular inspections of the major depots in the country. These delegations, created by the Mol and the MoD, travel to depots, and check the stocks of weapons and ammunition against their own records.

A formal process exists for requesting weapons and involves completing a form entitled 'number 14'. At the national level, this form can be approved by a minister, deputy minister, or director-level official—depending on the situation and the level

or type of request. In the provinces, approval for the distribution of police weapons lies with the chief of police or the provincial governor. Once the relevant paperwork is submitted, it is sent to the Department of Technical Affairs.

Although these procedures have been in effect for some time, many commanders and others still do not follow them. This is due to a lack of knowledge or understanding of the procedures, and the availability of alternative paths to obtain weapons through personal connections. The formal procedure is therefore generally used by those that have just finished the military or police academy.

The reporting line between the local commanders and the central authorities is often unclear when it comes to weapons management. There is also a significant gap in tracking the movement of weapons, exacerbated by the frequent transfer and rotation of local Taliban units and *delgai*.¹¹ In Helmand, for instance, *delgai* commanders and other officials do not know what happened to the lists they shared with the Mol. Additionally, the majority of commanders who were in Helmand moved to Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, and other parts of Afghanistan, taking their weapons with them. Consequently, the weapons that are supposed to be in Helmand, according to their initial registration with the local commanders, are now elsewhere.

Management of weapons in circulation

Weapons in the hands of Taliban fighters and officials remain primarily uncatalogued. According to some sources, the leadership in Kabul sent at least seven letters to hundreds of commanders at all levels, asking them to register their weapons. Commanders of *delgai* were asked to register their weapons with the district-level authorities; the lists were then passed on to the provincial-level authorities, who sent them to Kabul. Interviewees

⁹ Interview with Taliban official, Kunduz, 2 December 2022, and Taliban officials, Kabul, 24 December 2022.

¹⁰ Interviews with Taliban commanders, Kunduz, 3 and 5 December 2022.

¹¹ See footnote 6.

suggested, however, that probably only around half of the weapons in circulation were successfully registered this way.¹²

Even in Kabul, registering weapons already in circulation has been challenging. The case of the Mol's Protection of Public Offices Unit illustrates this point. Fighters were tasked to protect various ministries and sites in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Republic, and retroactive attempts were made to organize them into police platoons. Only much later, as part of this retroactive reorganization, did the Mol catalogue the weaponry on hand. During the inventory process, the Mol did not provide instructions or guidance on how to collect this information, or specify which information to collect. The head of each platoon was simply tasked to register people working for them. This situation occurred because most of the weapons are seen as belonging to commanders, not individual fighters; if a commander and his men had, for example, ten weapons, all of them were considered the property of the commander. No biometrics or other details were recorded.

The concept of arms 'ownership'

A key problem is that few weapons are seen as the property of the Taliban or the state; instead, most property is regarded as the fighter's personal property, or the property of their respective *delgai*. During their time as an insurgency, Taliban commanders usually had to buy—or otherwise obtain—their own weapons, which they continue to use to this day. Fighters typically received weapons from their *mahaz* or *delgai* commanders. No centralized weapons inventory existed during the insurgency, and fighters did not typically obtain their weapons through any centralized mechanism in the movement.

Roughly speaking, Taliban fighters distinguish between three types of weapons: those privately

obtained by the commanders and then distributed to fighters; those captured during the Taliban insurgency before 15 August 2021; and those obtained by commanders from the authorities after the seizure of the Republic's weapons in August 2021. With the exception of the last category, weapons are generally viewed as private property. Commanders therefore often refuse the registration of weapons that fall under the first two categories.

When individuals and commanders are asked to register their weapons, they generally only agree to register those received after August 2021. They are typically given three options: to register their weapons and retain their position; to refuse registration, resign from their position, and leave the movement; or to register their personal weapons with a statement declaring that they are 'private' weapons. Taliban sources report that, when pressured, many commanders left their position rather than register their weapons.¹³

Powerful commanders, in particular, tend not to agree to register their weapons, and the ministerial leadership appears reluctant to challenge these influential figures. Some commanders may have registered a small portion of their weapons, but no one—in at least one informant's view—registered all of them.

Subnational-level policies and practices

Kunduz province

The northern province of Kunduz offers an illustrative example of the struggle to control weapons since August 2021. After the collapse of the Republic, Taliban commanders and fighters seized sizable caches of weapons and ammunition in Kunduz from vacant checkpoints, offices, and military bases. Significant caches were also left at Kunduz airport, home of a major Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) base at the time.

¹² Interviews with Taliban official, Kabul, 3 December 2022; Taliban commander, Kabul, 5 December 2022; and Taliban commander, Kabul, 23 December 2022.

¹³ Interviews with Taliban officials, Kunar, 12 December 2022; Taliban commander, Helmand, 14 December 2022; and Taliban commander, Kunduz, 5 December 2022.

Some commanders stationed men at these sites to secure these weapons, while other weapons were transported to their homes or other hiding places.

The new Taliban, however, have made several attempts to catalogue and assert control over these weapons. They began collecting them in September 2021 through two types of efforts. The first—and most significant—measure was undertaken at the provincial level. The governor and chief of police asked all commanders to bring the weapons they had taken, which led to the return of at least some weapons in October and November 2021. The provincial authorities continued to collect weapons every day, and the GDI started raiding houses based on intelligence gathered through other seizures.

At the same time, groups were formed in Kabul within the MoD to carry out inspections of prominent commanders' houses in the provinces. The home of the current head of the Afghan army in Kunduz, for example, was searched, resulting in the seizure of a significant number of weapons and ammunition. He was initially removed from his post, but then reinstated after arguing that he was merely securing and hiding the weapons.

In Kunduz, weapons can be obtained from the central police stations, as elsewhere, but more elaborate policies appear to be in place. The ability to issue weapons and ammunition lies with the provincial police chief, but the *amir aminet* (the head of security and the first deputy provincial police chief) must also approve by signature for any weapon distribution. Distribution lists are also reportedly shared with the relevant ministries in Kabul.

Helmand province

The Taliban takeover of Helmand was somewhat more orderly than that of Kunduz, and many of the military leaders of the Taliban have strong roots in Helmand. Numerous commanders kept the weapons they obtained by facilitating the surrender of Republic security forces. For example, the current

chief of police was then a commander of the Taliban special forces, and both powerful and well known. A number of Republic soldiers and police surrendered to him, handing over their weapons in the process—which the police chief then kept. This practice of keeping the majority, or a significant share, of the weapons surrendered appears to have been relatively commonplace in Helmand. When the current police chief's mahaz was integrated into the Shorab army corps, his men allegedly used this opportunity to steal and smuggle weapons. Eventually, this racket was uncovered when two vehicles loaded with weapons to be smuggled to Pakistan were intercepted and traced back to the police chief.¹⁴

Key informants nevertheless reported relatively clear weapons management processes. Weapons storage facilities are mainly in former NATO and Republic bases, such as Camp Bastian. The practice of documenting weapons inventories began after 15 August 2021. Weapons can be officially obtained from the central police station, as well as through the main police training academy.

In general, the Taliban impose strict restrictions—at least on paper—regarding weapon distribution in Helmand, since the distributions are considered unnecessary due to the current absence of fighting. Yet both the provincial police chief and provincial governor—who has comparatively greater influence, as opposed to his counterparts in Kunduz—have the power to distribute weapons. Some high-level commanders often bypass official processes to obtain access to weapons. Weapons are also distributed informally through delgai commanders.

Weapons in the depots are relatively secure. In some cases, powerful commanders have informally taken weapons from these depots, without formal authorization. This practice, however, was described as marginal; while they may be able to take a weapon or two for their own personal use, they cannot walk away with significant quantities of arms or ammunition.

14 Interviews with Taliban commander, Helmand, 3 December 2022, and Taliban commander, Kandahar, 7 December 2022.

Conclusions

The Taliban are attempting to exert tighter control over weapons in the country, drawing on the policies of the Republic of Afghanistan. To the extent that it is possible to draw conclusions from pilot field investigations undertaken in late 2022, it appears that the central authorities have improved the security around large weapon stockpiles. The management of weapons in circulation, however, remains limited, especially when it comes to the arms in the hands of Taliban commanders and the men under their leadership. Due to the culture that arose during the insurgency phase of the Taliban, commanders consider most of their weapons—both their own and those provided to the men under their command—as personal property. The degree to which Taliban commanders resist the central authorities' efforts to register their weapons is in part a function of local power dynamics and lines of loyalty to Kabul and the emir that vary from province to province. But as of early 2023, it was not clear whether the central authorities could exert more pressure on local commanders to register weapons without encountering serious resistance.

For these reasons, investigations that seek to understand and monitor the risk of arms proliferation in, from, and to Afghanistan should focus not only on price information and the availability of weapons in markets in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and partnerships and conflicts with other non-state armed groups in the region, but also on the political economy of the Taliban themselves: their ongoing attempts to evolve from an insurgency to a government, and the internal fault lines between different power centres, as well as between the periphery and central political and religious authorities. Future research should therefore continue to assess both the internal dynamics of the Taliban and their relationships with external state and non-state actors. ●

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ANDSF Afghan National Defence and Security Forces

GDI General Directorate of Intelligence

ISKP Islamic State Khorasan Province

MoD Ministry of Defence

MoI Ministry of Interior

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