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Safeguarding Afghanistan's Next Generation from Taliban Indoctrination

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Policy Brief

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Contents

Abstract

This policy brief makes the case that Afghanistan's religious education under the Taliban has been transformed into a centralized system of indoctrination and political control. I show how *madrassahs* have expanded rapidly, replacing diverse traditions with a single, state-approved Islam and repurposing schools, universities, and civic spaces for ideological reproduction. I argue that indoctrination now targets both boys and girls, embedding absolutist narratives that glorify martyrdom and reject democratic ideas, freedom, and pluralism. The brief highlights how *madrassahs* have become recruitment hubs, surveillance sites, and pipelines for suicide bombers, reinforced by propaganda, rewards, and external funding. I recommend a dual strategy to counter this trend: Afghan-led resistance through families, educators, civil society, and moderate religious leaders, supported by coordinated regional and international support. Overall, the brief contributes to ongoing policy debates on how extremist education can be challenged and pluralistic alternatives safeguarded in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Taliban, *madrassah*, indoctrination, Afghanistan, countering violent extremism.

Introduction

This policy brief makes the case that Afghanistan's religious education system under Taliban rule has been transformed into an instrument of ideological control. Since August 2021, the Emirate has centralized *madrassahs*, suppressing diversity and repurposing schools, universities, and civic spaces for indoctrination. Unlike the Republic, which struggled to regulate a fragmented system, the Taliban now exercise monopoly power over curricula, staffing, and operations. I draw on Afghan testimonies, official statements, and prior studies to show how *madrassahs* have shifted from scattered institutions into a coordinated network of indoctrination and recruitment. Indoctrination is systematic, targeting both boys and girls, embedding absolutist narratives that glorify martyrdom and delegitimize alternative futures. For many Afghans, *madrassahs* now embody both survival and coercion: they provide food and shelter in poverty, but also narrow worldviews and enforce obedience. I situate this expansion within Afghanistan's history of religious schooling, while highlighting its distinctiveness as a state-building project aimed at producing a "third generation Taliban" — youth raised entirely within *madrassahs* that prioritize ideological conformity, militant values, and loyalty over critical learning or pluralistic citizenship.

What is happening?

a. Expansion of madrassahs

Madrassahs in Afghanistan are not new. They trace their lineage back more than a millennium, when Islamic learning gradually replaced older traditions like Zoroastrianism and Buddhism and cities such as Balkh, Herat, and Merv became intellectual hubs. In the 11th century, the Seljuk vizier Nizam al-Mulk established the *Madaris al-Nizamiyya*, formal institutions combining religious education with welfare, that shaped Islamic education widely. In Afghanistan, rulers from Amir Abdur Rahman Khan in the late 19th century to King Zahir Shah in the mid-20th century formalized madrassahs under state oversight. These institutions served to balance legitimacy and modernization without losing religious identity.

The Republic era (2001–2021) inherited this history but struggled to manage it. Religious schooling existed in three categories: state-run madrassahs under the Ministry of Education, semi-independent institutions that loosely followed government curriculum, and fully independent or unregistered *madrassahs*. The last category was the largest, ranging from small mosque-based schools to more conservative seminaries with transnational links. Oversight was minimal. Teacher quality, curricula, and ideology varied widely. The government sought integration and reform but lacked reach and resources, particularly in insecure rural areas where demand for religious schooling was high and public schools were absent or distrusted. By 2019, official figures counted thousands of madrassahs, yet the system remained fragmented. Parallel oversight by the Ministries of Education and Hajj created confusion, while tens of thousands of unregistered *madrassahs* operated outside any state authority. This patchwork network formed the landscape the Taliban inherited in 2021.

When the Taliban returned to power, they moved quickly to transform fragmentation into monopoly. Between 2022 and 2024, official reports cited more than 22,000 Islamic education centers established, including nearly 20,000 *madrassahs*, with plans for 16,000 more. By 2025, estimates suggested more than 3.6 million students were enrolled. For many respondents in this study, the scale was staggering. Teachers, students, and officials described this expansion not

as educational reform but as strategic consolidation. Schools, teacher-training centers, parts of Kabul University and civic landmarks like Darul Aman Palace were converted into *madrassahs*, often abruptly and without planning. This was less about access and more about using *madrassahs* for ideological control. One participant called this "social engineering" rather than education, while another noted that in practice *madrassahs* function as "political incubators" rather than schools. Families send their children not only because of ideology but also because *madrassahs* provide food, lodging, and stipends in a time of poverty. This survival function strengthens their appeal, particularly in rural and marginalized areas, but it also deepens dependence on Taliban institutions.

b. How indoctrination works

The Taliban's centralization is not just administrative; it is ideological. Under the Emirate, no *madrassah* operates independently. Financing, staffing, and curricula are controlled by the state. Where diversity once existed between Sunni and Shia schools, and between moderate and hardline schools, now only a single sanctioned orthodoxy remains. As one educator interviewed put it, "Afghanistan is home to many ethnicities and traditions, but the Taliban have taken every ounce of freedom from us." In practice, this means the erasure of sectarian plurality, with Shia jurisprudence (*Jafari fiqh*) marginalized and Hanafi orthodoxy enforced nationwide. Curricula prioritize Arabic, Qur'an, Hadith, and Islamic law, with science, mathematics, and other modern subjects pushed to the margins. In some girls' *madrassahs*, religious studies occupy up to 36 hours per week, while math or computer classes may be allotted an hour. Instruction, I argue, is not designed to foster critical thought but to embed loyalty, obedience, and suspicion of alternative worldviews. Interviews revealed consistent themes: democracy, human rights, feminism, secularism, and migration to the West are condemned as corrupting, foreign imports. Women's public presence and education under the Republic are described as betrayal and weakness, rather than progress.

Indoctrination is reinforced through material and symbolic rewards. Students are offered gifts such as laptops or gold rings through competitions, sometimes promoted on Telegram channels. In this way, modern technology is used not to broaden horizons but to reinforce a closed worldview. Girls as well as boys are drawn into narratives of sacrifice, *hijra*, and *jihad*, encouraged to see themselves as part of a global Islamic struggle in which martyrdom is the highest calling. This approach represents not simply religious instruction but deliberate engineering of identity. It seeks to produce young Afghans whose self-understanding, values, and aspirations align entirely with the Emirate.

c. Suicide bomber glorification

Perhaps the most alarming dimension of the Taliban's educational project is its integration of suicide operations into religious instruction and national identity. Afghanistan is now arguably the only country where suicide bombers are systematically trained, celebrated, and memorialized by the state. The practice has roots in the insurgency. From the mid-2000s, Taliban units like *Lashkar-e-Badri* deployed suicide bombers at scale, many of them minors recruited from Pakistani *madrassahs*. By 2006, attacks had surged to more than 120 annually, compared to only a handful before 2005. Although militarily limited, these operations inflicted devastating psychological harm, undermining public trust in the government and terrorizing civilians. Since 2021, suicide operations have been reframed from tactics to sanctified acts of national identity. Memorials to early bombers have been erected, parades celebrate "martyrdom

brigades," and Taliban leaders openly praise families of suicide operatives. Media outlets such as *Alemarah* and RTA circulate stories of bombers as heroes, blending poetry, dreams of the Prophet, and tales of sacrifice into a powerful mythology. Interviewees consistently described *madrassahs* as central to this system. Religious schools influenced by the Haqqani model serve as pipelines, grooming young boys and increasingly girls into viewing suicide missions as honorable service to Islam and the Emirate. Students spoke of martyrdom as the "highest rank of reward," while officials and teachers described these schools as both recruitment hubs and sites of psychological conditioning. Rewards promised include spiritual salvation, paradise, and honor for one's family. Through this process, suicide bombing has shifted from a tactic to an ideology. It is no longer an insurgency tool but a formative element of national consciousness under Taliban rule.

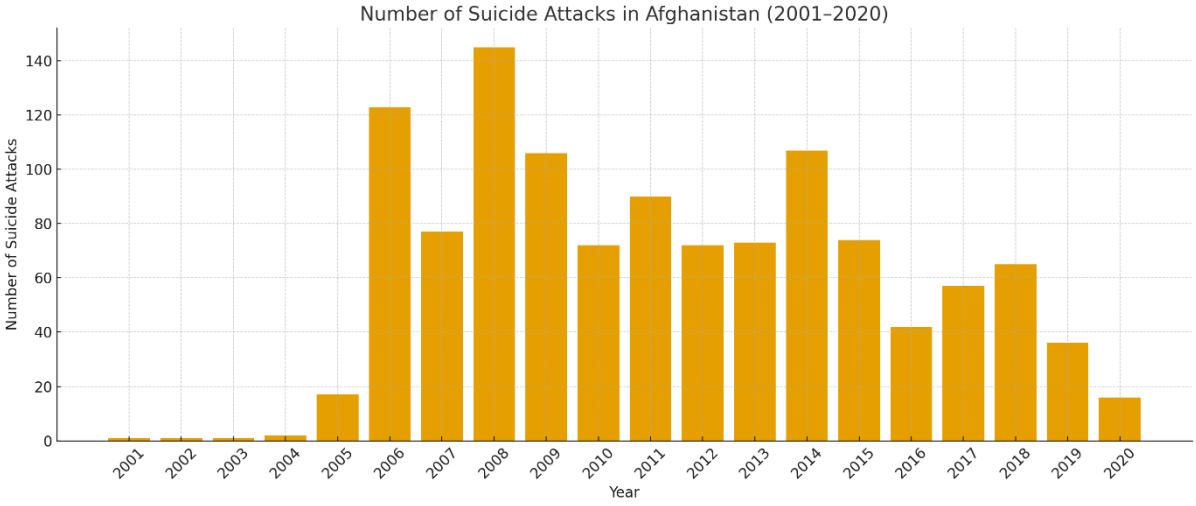

Figure 1: Number of suicide attacks in Afghanistan, 2001–2020. The data illustrate a sharp escalation after 2005, high levels through 2014, and a decline by 2020. Figures are drawn primarily from United Nation's Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) annual and quarterly reports on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, with 2009 data based on U.S. Army (2010) reporting.

d. Erasing diversity

Another striking feature of the Taliban's *madrassahfication* project is its erasure of religious and educational diversity. Shia institutions, long part of Afghanistan's plural landscape, face suppression. Sunni Hanafi doctrine is imposed as the only acceptable path. This excludes significant segments of Afghan society from representation within education. At the same time, non-religious institutions are being stripped of their original purpose. Public schools, teacher-training centers, media offices, and even Kabul University facilities have been converted into *madrassahs*. The symbolism is deliberate. When Darul Aman Palace, once a symbol of Afghan unity, was transformed into a religious school, or when Abdul Hai Habibi High School was converted from a science hub into a *madrassah*, thousands of students and teachers were displaced. These moves represent not only educational disruption but ideological conquest of civic space. Such repurposing sends a clear message: education now exists to serve the Emirate's ideology, not individual aspirations or national progress.

e. Propaganda and social engineering

The Taliban's indoctrination does not operate in isolation. It is integrated with media propaganda, cultural tools, and public rituals. Commemorations honor suicide bombers,

parades display captured Western weapons as *ghaneemat*, and songs and poetry glorify martyrdom. *Taranas*, storytelling, and digital campaigns amplify these narratives, presenting the Taliban not only as rulers but as the divinely ordained defenders of Islam. Foreign funding compounds this trend. Uzbekistan's financing of a multimillion-dollar *madrassah* complex in Mazar-e-Sharif and Turkish charity investments in new religious schools illustrate how external actors, often inadvertently, reinforce the Emirate's ideological project under the guise of humanitarian aid. For many Afghans, these dynamics create a closed loop: poverty and religiosity make *madrassahs* attractive; *madrassahs* embed obedience and glorify sacrifice; propaganda sanctifies violence; and foreign and domestic investment sustain the system. The result, as respondents repeatedly warned, is the cultivation of a "third generation Taliban": youth raised entirely within this engineered environment, with limited exposure to alternative worldviews, taught to equate loyalty with piety and martyrdom with honor.

Photo 1: Screenshot from a 2009 video showing Sirajuddin Haqqani addressing a group of suicide bombers, promoting divine trust, unity, and spiritual resolve.

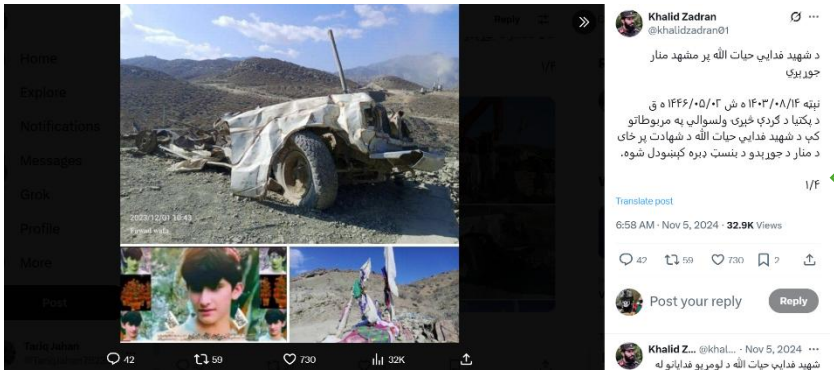

Photo 2: Taliban officials announce a monument for their first suicide bomber, shared in April 2024 on X by Kabul Police spokesperson Khalid Zadran.

What should be done?

Since the Taliban's return to power, what we have been experiencing is a clear and sustained reversal of civic freedoms, education access and social openness. The de-facto authorities have continuously narrowed people's access to the outside world, restricting movement, work, schooling (especially for women and girls), and freedom of expression, while using surveillance, intimidation and detention to silence critics. We see an institutionalized system of

exclusion and rising human-rights violations. Most recently, Taliban suspended fibre-optic (Wi-Fi) internet in some provinces such as Balkh. This is particularly damaging. The internet empowered people to stay connected, learn, share information, and document Taliban actions, turning ordinary citizens into participants in the information ecosystem. This highlights how the group controls infrastructure to cut people off from education, news and communications. These developments make broad reform difficult, but a two-strand approach may help resist Taliban *madrassahfication* and indoctrination: Afghan-led, local, low-risk actions that protect learning and community resilience; and targeted support from international Islamic institutions (e.g., OIC, Al-Azhar), and faith-based charities that legitimize reform from inside the religious space.

Afghan-led resistance

The goal is to keep learning, religious debate and community resilience alive while minimising exposure to Taliban reprisals. Therefore, resistance must primarily come from within Afghan society. Despite repression, Afghans continue to show resilience, creativity, and determination.

a. Support discreet, community-run learning hubs

These are small, low-profile learning circles (often in private homes) that combine basic literacy, numeracy and non-political civic education with contextual religious instruction by trusted, non-radical local teachers. Framed publicly as women-led home *madrassahs* to protect access for girls, these hubs should also allow boys to participate where appropriate and be organised through parents' committees, teachers from the republic era, community elders and women's groups. Low-cost and able to operate without formal registration, these informal centres are widespread, though the Taliban have targeted some and activities must be designed to minimise exposure.

b. Protect and empower non-radical teachers

Informal teacher-support networks, run by Afghan and international education NGOs, diaspora teacher groups and local unions, should provide discreet pedagogy coaching, non-confrontational curriculum alternatives and modest stipends (trusted cash transfers). This low-profile approach helps teachers to deliver non-ideological content. Because the Taliban have targeted visible networks, these activities must prioritise operational security (minimal public branding and routine local threat assessments) so they can operate safely and sustainably.

c. Use low-tech and hybrid education channels

In the first two years of Taliban's return, radio and community education platforms offered limited hope for girls and other marginalised learners, but many of these were later shut down. An offline-first approach—radio broadcasts, printed workbooks, USB/offline lesson packs etc.—therefore offers a reliable way to sustain learning when internet access is restricted. Where safe and technically feasible, diaspora-hosted social media, encrypted platforms and teacher-led content sharing can supplement offline channels to extend reach to women and rural communities. These activities should be coordinated by local NGOs, educators, religious scholars and diaspora networks and designed to minimise visibility.

d. Safe digital literacy and encrypted communications

Practical training for trusted educators and civil-society actors in digital safety, secure messaging and offline content storage (USBs, offline apps) is central. Delivered by diaspora

tech volunteers and discreet NGOs, sessions should be hands-on and modular and focus on threat awareness and prevention, so basic communications and learning can continue when networks are restricted.

Role of the Muslim world

Religious authorities and Islamic institutions can shift social norms and provide authoritative guidance that distinguishes mainstream Islamic scholarship from extremist interpretations.

a. Engage leading Islamic bodies, e.g., OIC and Al-Azhar

Although many leading Islamic institutions and scholars have been cautious or silent, Afghan civil society, the diaspora, academics and credible partners should urge bodies such as the OIC and Al-Azhar to issue clear guidance that distinguishes violent, distorted, extremist *madrassah* curricula from mainstream Islamic scholarship. Their religious authority would give crucial moral and theological legitimacy to reform inside Afghanistan. The least they can do is to issue joint public statements condemning militant interpretations. They can do this carefully in a good faith to minimise political backlash.

b. Fund safe learning alternatives via faith-based charities

Education-focused bodies should channel discreet, small-scale funding through trusted local NGOs and faith-based charities for radio lessons, teacher stipends, printed materials and safe learning spaces rather than visible, high-profile projects. Accountability can be built through local audits, community feedback mechanisms and diaspora oversight to minimise diversion and reduce backlash.

Key takeaway

There is no magic formula to change the ongoing indoctrination; however, these and similar steps, while not devoid of threats and risks, can help minimize this. They avoid confrontational, high-profile projects that are likely to be shut down and prioritise low-visibility, culturally resonant, and religiously legitimated actions. This approach will likely survive in a repressive context while delivering protection for learning and religious plurality. Failure to respond to the Taliban's educational project carries significant risks: it entrenches authoritarian control by raising a generation whose loyalty is manufactured through indoctrination; it embeds sectarian marginalization by silencing Afghanistan's religious and ethnic diversity; and it fuels national and transnational security threats by institutionalizing suicide bomber grooming and glorification.

I reiterate that Taliban's *madrassah* expansion is not an education policy but a strategy of authoritarian state-building and militant reproduction. Donors and policymakers must recognize that supporting religious schools under the current regime risks strengthening indoctrination rather than fostering learning. I believe in a coordinated response that invests in alternatives through public and discreet approaches to prevent the rise of a new generation shaped entirely by extremist ideology.

Conclusion

I argue that the Taliban's post-2021 transformation of Afghanistan's *madrassah* education is not a revival of religious learning but a deliberate project of authoritarian state-building. *Madrassahs*, once diverse and loosely regulated, are being repurposed as instruments of conformity: curricula, ceremonies and messaging now emphasise obedience and martyrdom while sidelining critical learning. Drawing on Afghan perspectives, official documents, and media sources, this brief shows how these changes function politically, embedding indoctrination, erasing pluralism and creating conditions for long-term radicalization. Curriculum changes, ideological ceremonies, and digital propaganda reinforce a culture where obedience and martyrdom are presented as the highest forms of citizenship. The key finding is the emergence of a "third generation Taliban": youth raised within *madrassahs* that prioritize militant values over critical learning. The implications extend beyond Afghanistan. The indoctrination risks radicalizing society for decades, entrenching authoritarian control, and exporting instability across the region. There is no magic formula, but a pragmatic dual strategy: Afghan-led, low-visibility learning with legitimacy and assistance from Islamic institutions can contain this. This brief contributes to policy debates on how extremist education can be countered and how inclusive schooling can be safeguarded under Taliban rule.

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