



**Afghan Witness**

**Taliban Management of the Education Sector**

**February 2024**

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## 2 Executive Summary

This report aims to provide an update on the state of education in Afghanistan in 2023, and builds on previous AW reports on the sector. It examines the Taliban's stated vision for education, based on communications from the Ministry of Education and senior Taliban officials - including the Supreme Leader - and compares it with the reality experienced by practitioners, institutions, and students in the country.

Throughout the year, Taliban officials have been vocal on education and their desire to transform the system in line with their views and values. In the first part of the report, AW analyses these statements, drawing out the consistent themes in communications, including:

- Ensuring widespread access to education, including for returning refugees from Pakistan.
- Promoting religious and scientific education as dual pillars of education, required to strengthen Afghan society.
- Improving educational infrastructure across the country to enable higher quality education.
- Reforming curricula to ensure alignment with Islamic Sharia and global standards.
- Strengthening the capacity of teachers, lecturers, and MoE staff.
- Encouraging patience regarding the roll out of women and girls' education.

The report then highlights the realities on the ground, as reported by media, social media users, and sources in Afghanistan, and recorded by AW. Major elements that were witnessed included:

- The destruction of educational property across Afghanistan.
- An increase in the number of madrasas and private religious schools.
- Staffing changes, including an increase in recruitment for religious schools.
- The limited space for alternative options for education.
- Violence perpetrated against teachers and students.
- The ways in which women and girls' education is often dependent on local authorities' application of central Taliban policies.

Many of these on the ground realities highlight a gradual but persistent erosion of Afghanistan's Republican-era education system as the Taliban attempts to take control and impose its preferred vision.

The group did not significantly amend the limited space for women and girls, despite ongoing commitments to do so, and aimed to shut down foreign efforts in the education sector, as well as seeking to exert control over madrasas as another vector of influence for unwelcome actors.

Although some of the on-the-ground realities explored in this report diverge from the vision the Taliban sought to portray, they often align with the Taliban's worldview and interpretation of Sharia; moreover, they likely reflect the Taliban's desired role for education within the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

### 3 Introduction

In September 2021, shortly after the Taliban seized power in Kabul, the group effectively banned girls' education beyond the sixth grade<sup>1</sup>, by only [reopening](#) secondary schools for boys. This mandate aligned with Taliban policies from the group's previous rule in Afghanistan, between 1996 and 2001, which severely [restricted](#) the rights of women and girls, including the right to education.

Then, in February 2022, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) issued two [orders](#), stipulating gender segregated classes for students in public universities, and dress codes for students and staff; female students and staff were to attend classes wearing the hijab, while male students and staff were required to wear the shalwar kameez<sup>2</sup>. This was followed by a March 2022 [decree](#) ordering male employees to refrain from shaving their beards and attend prayers five times daily.

Also in March 2022, the hopes of teenage girls across the country were briefly raised when the Ministry of Education (MoE) [announced](#) that high schools would reopen for all students on 23 March. On that day, however, as thousands of girls prepared to attend their first lessons in months, the MoE [backtracked](#) on the decision and announced that all girls' secondary schools would remain closed indefinitely, until a policy could be formulated in accordance with "[Sharia and Afghan](#)" culture.

Further restrictions were placed on women's education in December 2022, when the Taliban instituted a [ban](#) on women attending higher education. Other notable developments in Afghanistan's education sector in 2022 include the [prohibition](#) of literacy institutes establishing classrooms in residential houses, higher education curriculum [reform](#), and increasing Taliban [oversight](#) of university lecturer appointments.

This report endeavours to follow up on past [AW reports](#) and provide an update regarding education in Afghanistan in 2023. It first examines communications MoE and senior Taliban communications, to ascertain the group's vision they aim to share regarding education.

The MoE actively promoted its activities via its website, and its official X account (formerly Twitter), with 576 posts shared throughout the year. Many senior officials, including the Minister of Education, the Minister of Higher Education, the Minister of Interior, the Minister of Defence, and even the Taliban's Supreme Leader made references to education in various speeches in 2023. AW analysed this activity in Section 4, with data covering the period between 1 January 2023 and 31 December 2023, with the exception of the subsection on curriculum reform, which features one announcement from January 2024. AW determined that these communications largely fell into the following categories, aligning with Taliban priorities for the sector: ensuring widespread access to education; promotion of religious and scientific education; improving infrastructure; curriculum reform; capacity building for teachers, lecturers and MoE staff; and the urging of patience regarding women and girls'

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<sup>1</sup> Students of the 6th grade in Afghanistan are usually aged between 11-13.

<sup>2</sup> Traditional attire, consisting of loose trousers and tunic or shirt as a top, worn by both men and women in Afghanistan and other countries in Southern Asia.

education.

Section 5 of the report highlights the realities on the ground, as reported by media, social media users, and local sources. This section examines the destruction of educational property across Afghanistan; the growing number of madrasas and private religious schools; staffing changes, including an increase in recruitment for religious schools; the limited alternative options available for education in the country; violence perpetrated against teachers, students, and those who question Taliban policies; and, the ways in which women and girls' education is often dependent on local authorities' application of Taliban policies. While many of the observed situations differ from the official Taliban narrative, it is likely that these realities reflect, at least in part, the Taliban's desired role for education in Afghanistan.

AW notes that there are some limitations to the data presented in this report. While the Taliban actively shared achievements and promoted MoE's activities on social media, general restrictions on the media and widespread self-censorship likely limited journalists' and individuals' abilities to report lived experiences within the education sector. As such, this report does not claim to be a comprehensive account, rather, it reflects a snapshot indicative of some of the lived experiences.

## 4 Taliban vision of education in Afghanistan in 2023

This section analyses the Taliban's communications regarding education in 2021, including Ministry of Education (MoE) website content and social media posts, as well as speeches and statements provided to the media by senior Taliban leaders. AW used these communications to examine the Taliban's vision, or narrative they aim to portray, regarding education in Afghanistan, which focused on:

- Ensuring widespread access to education, including for returning refugees from Pakistan.
- Promoting religious and scientific education as dual pillars of education, required to strengthen Afghan society.
- Improving educational infrastructure across the country to enable higher quality education.
- Reforming curricula to ensure alignment with Islamic Sharia and global standards.
- Strengthening the capacity of teachers, lecturers, and MoE staff.
- Encouraging patience regarding the roll out of women and girls' education.

### 4.1 Ensuring widespread access to education

In an Eid message, [issued](#) on 18 April 2023, the Taliban's Supreme Leader Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada said that, within the field of education, it is a paramount duty of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to expand educational outreach across the entire country, and ensure quality education for all children<sup>3</sup>. In this speech, he also noted that effective plans for further development of the education sector were underway.

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<sup>3</sup> Education for all includes girls, up until the sixth grade. Section 4.6 below examines Taliban communications regarding education for women and girls, while Section 5.6 considers the realities of women and girls accessing education in Afghanistan in 2023.

Many MoE announcements throughout the year also sought to underscore the importance of access to education for all – in urban centres as well as rural villages and remote areas. On X (formerly Twitter), the MoE [vowed](#) that it aims to provide balanced educational services to all parts of the country and for Afghan children of all ethnicities.

Other posts focused on equitable distribution of textbooks. One [stated](#) that the MoE aimed to reach students in central and remote areas of the country, adding that 150,000 volumes of textbooks had been delivered to Nuristan province. The Ministry also [announced](#) that it had printed and distributed [38.6 million volumes of textbooks](#) across the provinces, taking into account the requirements of various education departments and the number of students in each province. In December, the Ministry announced that textbooks were distributed in [Parwan](#), [Kandahar](#), [Nangarhar](#), [Kapisa](#), and in [Panjshir](#).

In the picture below, the MoE [claimed](#) to be distributing textbooks to madrasas in Kandahar province. AW identified them as Pashto language textbooks.



*Figure: Pashto language textbooks, which were allegedly distributed in Kandahar by the MoE.*

The Taliban also sought to extend educational opportunities to the children of Afghan refugees who were [forcibly returned](#) from Pakistan in November 2023. The MoE announced that the Nangarhar Provincial Education Department [distributed](#) educational materials to 300 students who had recently returned to Afghanistan, and encouraged returnees to send their children to the newly established classes in Torkham. In December, the MoE [claimed](#) that educational facilities were being provided for refugee children in Balkh, and [expressed](#) its ongoing commitment to providing educational facilities for children of families returning from Pakistan. The MoE also [organised](#) a collective exam in Kabul, for these students, to establish their educational level, and attract them to schools in the capital.

## 4.2 Promotion of religious and scientific education

In 2023, Taliban leaders, alongside the MoE, promoted both scientific and religious education, emphasising that these schools of thought were not in conflict with one another. Instead, the de facto authorities [claimed](#) that when combined, these disciplines would serve to strengthen the fabric of Afghan society.

In October 2023, during a conference on economic development in Paktia, the Taliban's deputy leader and Minister of Interior Khalifa Sirajuddin Haqqani, [highlighted](#) the importance of religious and “contemporary” education, saying that Afghans should grow “ideologically and technically” for the development of the country. At the same conference, Sheikh Neda Mohammad Nadeem, the Minister of Higher Education, [promoted](#) sciences, including economics and medicine, noting that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was in need of medicine and physicians. Nadeem [also](#) added that the Taliban was “not against education.”

Throughout the year, the MoE shared several posts [encouraging](#) students to study science. These communications [included](#) Taliban officials [visiting and supervising classes](#) in school laboratories and [computer rooms](#) across the country. The Ministry also shared scientific events, for example, a [science fair-like](#) event in Sheberghan City, Jawzjan.



*Figure: Taliban and students in the capital of Jawzjan participating in a science fair-like in December 2023.*

In textbook distribution campaigns, alongside the Pashto language textbooks, mentioned above, the Taliban also [distributed](#) science textbooks in 2023. Seen in the photo below, from December, the textbooks being distributed have titles relating biology, chemistry, and mathematics.



*Figure: Local MoE authorities distributing science textbooks in Kapisa in December 2023.*

Also in December 2023, the Taliban's Ministers of Defence, Interior and Higher Education attended a graduation ceremony for students at Kabul University; the trio delivered speeches emphasising the importance of both religion and modern science, and calling for unity between the disciplines.

Defence Minister Mawlawi Yaqub [underscored](#) the importance of embracing modern science, emphasising the essential role that teachers, doctors, and engineers play in society. He said that just as each organ in the human body serves a distinct function, vital to life, a diverse range of skills is indispensable for Afghanistan's prosperity. Yaqub blamed international powers for pitting modern science experts against religious scholars – he said that religious scholars are often told to limit their role to religious matters, while modern scholars are labelled as ideologically secular; instead, of perpetuating this narrative, he called for mutual acceptance, love, and respect, emphasising the need to recognise each group's contribution and foster unity for the country's well-being.

The Minister of Interior [underscored](#) the importance of unity between universities and madrassas for the prosperity of Afghanistan. Minister Haqqani also stressed the importance of keeping educational institutions in Afghanistan free from politicisation. He assured students that the Taliban had not waged jihad against them or the country, and affirmed his commitment to bridging the gap between the Taliban and the academic community, aiming to foster mutual understanding and cooperation.

Finally, in his speech, Minister Nadeem [urged](#) students to safeguard the system – the Taliban regime – through the application of their education and their commitment to Islamic ideology.

These sentiments were often seen throughout the year, as senior Taliban officials made comments claiming that gaps between secular and religious education had been reduced, or even removed. At the Natural Sciences Symposium, in [July](#) 2023, hosted at Sheikh Zayed University, Minister Haqqani noted that the distance between madrasas and universities had been “reduced.” He said: “for a long time, there has been an effort in the country to position schools and universities against one another,” and celebrated the bridging of the gap. In [September](#) 2023, the Taliban's Minister of Higher Education echoed these sentiments, saying that the distance between madrasas and universities had been “removed.”

Throughout the year, the MoE made efforts to highlight the achievements of secular and religious schools alike. MoE communications featured madrasas (including those for [girls](#)), [jihadi madrasas](#), and [darul ulooms](#), alongside secular [primary schools](#) and [high schools](#). Similarly, the Ministry also endeavoured to [highlight](#) joint graduation ceremonies – for students of madrasas alongside students from secular schools, to underscore the unity of secular and religious education.

### 4.3 Improving infrastructure

In 2023, the MoE posted numerous pictures documenting measures taken to address educational infrastructure, sometimes in cooperation with NGOs, to improve conditions at Afghanistan's schools.

On 25 December 2023, the MoE [announced](#) that throughout the past six months, it had built 559 schools in different provinces, and noted that 60 more were under construction. In December alone,



the Ministry announced the [renovation](#), construction, and [opening](#) of new [schools](#) in [Ghazni](#), [Faryab](#), [Logar](#), and [Nangarhar](#). The Ministry also announced the completion of renovations of several high schools in Kabul's [PD12](#), [PD10](#), and [PD16](#) areas, alongside 11 educational and administrative institutions in [Sarpol](#). The MoE also celebrated the beginning of the construction process for [primary](#) schools in Laghman.

Other education-related infrastructure projects in 2023 included those that sought to improve [sanitation](#) in secondary schools – both secular and religious. Some of these projects focused on the construction of [solar powered systems](#) and [wells](#), to ensure safe [water supplies](#), while [others](#) constructed toilets, handwashing stations, and sanitary garbage disposals.

While higher education facilities did not appear to be the MoE's primary focus when considering infrastructure improvements in 2023, some communications demonstrated an appetite to build and enhance Afghanistan's universities. These included announcements concerning the [beginning](#) of new construction projects at universities in Zabul and Nimroz.

#### 4.4 Curriculum reform

In October 2022, the Taliban [announced](#) their plan to “refine” universities' curricula, based on “Islamic Sharia and global standards.” In 2023, the Taliban continued along this path, focusing mainly on higher education institutes, but also revising the curriculum for primary schools.

In January 2023, the Taliban's Minister of Higher Education [announced](#) that a revision of the curriculum for faculties of literature across all public and private universities had begun. The Deputy Minister [added](#) that the curriculum would be prepared based on religious and national values, and emphasised that it would be aligned with international education standards. Then, in May 2023, Minister Nadeem [announced](#) that the work on university curricula was complete, claiming that approximately 70 subjects had been revised. He said that these curricula would be provided to universities “soon”. As of 14 January 2024, the Taliban have yet to release the new curriculum.

In November 2023, a meeting of the Taliban's cabinet in Kandahar, led by the group's Supreme Leader, discussed education, among other matters. Details of the meeting, [disclosed](#) by the General Directorate of Administrative Affairs of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), revealed that the committee responsible for crafting curricula for schools was instructed to expedite the development of a new curriculum that adheres to principles that do not contradict Islamic Sharia.

In early 2024, the MoE announced changes to Afghanistan's primary school curriculum. In an interview, Ministry Spokesman Mansour Ahmed Hamzeh [said](#) that a committee, composed of high-ranking officials – including the Taliban's Minister of Higher Education and the Chief Justice – made changes to the primary school curriculum, up to the sixth grade. These changes, he noted, included the removal of books that were considered to be in violation of Islamic principles and tenets.

#### 4.5 Capacity building for teachers, lecturers, and Ministry of Education staff

Throughout the year, MoE communications regularly noted that the Ministry, along with its provincial representatives, emphasised [improving the quality of teaching](#). In pursuit of this goal, the MoE held numerous capacity-building [seminars and](#) teacher [training](#) sessions.

On 16 January 2023, MoE's spokesman [announced](#) that the Ministry had run a capacity-building workshop for 16,000 teachers, and noted that professional teachers – those who could train other teachers – would be deployed across many areas of the country to improve the quality of teaching staff.

Aligned with this narrative, on 23 December 2023, the Ministry [stated](#) that it is committed to provide well-balanced educational services to all parts of the country, and to continuously develop capacity building programs for teachers to improve the quality of education. This statement was shared alongside a video which claimed to demonstrate measures the MoE is taking to achieve these goals.

Despite these ongoing efforts to build capacity amongst teachers in Afghanistan, on 12 July 2023, the MoE [announced](#) the suspension of the teacher training institutes<sup>4</sup> across all provinces. The Ministry noted that the previous government had already removed the Ministry of Teacher Training from the MoE structure, however, provincial teacher training institutes continued to operate without a plan sanctioned by the MoE. Moreover, the Ministry noted that maintaining the units would likely cost hundreds of millions of Afghanis<sup>5</sup> annually. AW notes that the closure of these institutes did not interfere with the Taliban's plans for capacity building within the education sector in 2023.

Alongside aiming to improve the quality of teaching in Afghanistan, the MoE also promoted ongoing education within the Ministry, [announcing collective examinations](#) for [Taliban members](#) who [missed school](#), as well as [training](#) and [workshops](#) for [MoE staff](#).

Also, during 2023, Taliban officials identified that higher education institutions in Afghanistan were facing a dearth of qualified instructors. In February, Atiqullah Azizi, the Deputy Minister of Information and Culture, [pointed out](#) that the country is gradually facing a shortage of academic figures, and suggested the government find new avenues for incentivisation. In September 2023, the Minister for Higher Education echoed these sentiments, [saying](#) that academic staff leaving the country was a challenge for higher education in Afghanistan, and urged lecturers and professors to continue to improve their capacity within Afghanistan. He also promised the Taliban would allocate 450 million Afghanis<sup>6</sup> for the promotion of professors in 2023.

Another means for enhancing the capacity of academics was identified at the Russian Federation's International Forum of Education Ministers, in the Republic of Tatarstan, in June 2023. At this meeting, the Taliban's Minister of Higher Education [expressed interest](#) in staff exchange programmes, or scholarships with "friendly countries." The proposed scheme would involve friendly countries sending professional staff to higher education institutions in Afghanistan to help increase the capacity of

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<sup>4</sup> Teacher training institutes were established when Afghan universities had limited capacity to train teachers. These institutes would train twelfth grade graduates for two years; these graduates would then be recruited by the government as teachers. As many university graduates are now unemployed, there is a reduced need for this service.

<sup>5</sup> Millions of GBP; 100,000,000 Afghanis = £1,084,986.

<sup>6</sup> Equivalent of £4,901,853

university lecturers, ultimately improving the country's educational standards.

#### 4.6 Patience required for women and girls' education

Regarding women and girls' education, Taliban messaging was mixed in 2023. However, many senior officials urged the public to have patience while the group worked to develop a plan to re-establish girls' education in Afghanistan.

During a [special interview](#) in September 2023 the Minister of Higher Education responded to questions about women's education, emphasising the need for public trust in the decisions of the Taliban regime, and urging Ulema and regime officials to refrain from expressing personal opinions on girls' education. Minister Nadeem added that the Taliban had not permanently prohibited girls' education, noting that the suspension was a "temporary decision". He also advised the people of Afghanistan to await updates on these issues patiently.

The Taliban's deputy leader and Minister of Interior also spoke about girls' education in 2023. During a visit to Herat in July 2023, Minister Haqqani [said](#) that Taliban leadership were trying to devise a solution suitable for reopening schools and universities for girls, but added that this would take some time. Then, in September 2023, he made his feelings more well-known at a meeting with the delegation from the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Kabul; in the meeting Haqqani [said](#) that girls' education is the "need of our society", and noted that the matter would be resolved.

Similarly, on 25 December 2023, during a meeting with a delegation of media representatives, journalists and media experts from Iran, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, the Taliban's political deputy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [said](#) that girls' education was their [Sharia-based right](#); he added that the Islamic Emirate was trying to "open the doors of education as soon as possible by creating a suitable environment." Stanikzai had previously [expressed](#) the Islamic imperative for rulers and governments to ensure the provision of facilities and conditions conducive for women's education.

### 5 Realities of education in Afghanistan in 2023

While Section 4 of this report focused on the Taliban's narrative regarding education in Afghanistan, this section examines the realities on the ground. It investigates the ways in which Taliban policies played out in practice – including the promotion of religious education, resulting in an increasing number of madrasas, and increased need for religious teachers across the country. Similarly, it examines the destruction of educational property, witnessed across Afghanistan. The section then assesses the limited alternative options for education in the country, and examines instances of violence perpetrated against teachers, students, and critics of Taliban policies. Finally, the section examines the ways in which women and girls' access to education is often dependent on local authorities' application of Taliban policies.

Many of these on the ground realities appear to undermine aspects of the Taliban's official narrative. However, not all elements explored in this section are solely the result of Taliban policies. For example, the closure of teacher training institutes resulted in MoE staff layoffs across the country, but the original

plan to shutter these institutes was hatched by the republican government. Similarly, incidents of suspicious poisonings recorded in education institutions across the country in 2023 cannot be explicitly attributed to the Taliban, nor are they unique to the Taliban era, as such incidents occurred under the former government as well.

## 5.1 Destruction, disrepair, and repurposing of educational property

In 2023, AW recorded at least 24 images and videos showing the destruction of educational property, including [alleged intentional destruction](#) by the [Taliban](#), the [repurposing](#) of [school](#) and university facilities for non-education-related functions, the closing down of [educational institutions](#), and [suspicious fires across the](#) provinces in 2023. Many secular schools also fell into disrepair, while building campaigns for religious schools continued unencumbered.

In May 2023, dormitories at Panjshir University were [converted](#) into a jihadi madrasa that was inaugurated when the Minister of Education Mawlawi Habibullah Agha visited the campus. Some 300 students said they were told to leave the building, resulting in many abandoning their studies.

In July 2023, in Paktika, students [complained](#) to the media about the lack of teachers and infrastructure for secular schools, despite the Taliban [building](#) nearly 600 religious schools in the province over the last two years. Meanwhile, according to MoE statistics, in 152 out of 412 secular schools in the province, students were studying in the open air, as buildings needed repair and unfit to host lessons; moreover, the province was facing a shortage of 1,862 teachers.

Also in July 2023, in Wardak, there were [reports](#) that local Taliban authorities are not allowing educational facilities built by the republican government to be used by students.

The [destruction](#) and [acquisition](#) of educational property were also witnessed in Hazara and Shiite majority areas in 2023. In September, a Shiite school was [destroyed](#) in Mazar-e-Sharif, Balkh; local sources told [8am media](#) the school was destroyed by people affiliated with the Taliban. Then, in October, the Taliban reportedly handed over three schools to Kochi nomads<sup>7</sup> in Bamyán; one [video](#) showed the destruction of the natural environment around one of the schools.

In a different form of destruction of educational property, in November 2023, an official letter [circulated](#) online, ordering all universities to rid their libraries of books written about and written by “political opponents.” AW verified the letter, signed by the Minister of Higher Education, and confirmed its authenticity.



Figure: The signature in the letter (to the left) compared to the signature in an authenticated sample (to the right).

<sup>7</sup> Nomadic Pashtuns from central and southern Afghanistan.

## 5.2 Growing number of madrasas and private religious schools

Since the Taliban came to power in 2021, the group has focused heavily on promoting religious education through Afghanistan's madrasas. The de facto authorities directly influence public madrasas, employing teachers and administrative staff through the MoE. The MoE also approves the curriculum, which is designed to align with the Taliban's religious and ideological beliefs; since the Taliban's takeover, an increased emphasis has been placed on the group's interpretation of Islamic teachings, with subjects such as jihad gaining prominence.

The Taliban has also aimed to exert additional control over Afghanistan's private<sup>8</sup> and unregistered<sup>9</sup> madrasas, to bring them under the MoE. Private madrasas have generally operated with significant autonomy, and have often been associated with individuals and groups that the Taliban perceive to pose an ideological or security threat.

Local sources told AW that the Taliban had reportedly begun recruiting teachers and administrative staff for these madrasas, but noted that not all institutions welcomed the intrusion. In some cases, sources said the Taliban had offered financial incentives to entice private madrasas to accept the Taliban-approved staff; in others, the Taliban reportedly threatened that the MoE would not attest to students' graduation diplomas and documents if the private madrasas would not accept their staff. AW is not able to independently verify these claims.

In April 2022, the head of the Taliban's Ministry of Education, [announced plans](#) to establish a large madrasa in each of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, and three to 10 new smaller religious schools in all 412 districts. In the months that followed AW recorded the [opening](#) of various [madrasas](#) across the country, some of which were in [buildings converted](#) or [taken over](#) by the Taliban.

These trends continued in 2023 with [announcements](#) of religious schools being built, [buildings](#) being [repurposed](#) for religious studies, and [inaugurations](#) of "jihadi madrasas<sup>10</sup>," ready to accept students. Alongside local media reports, these events were often [publicised](#) and [celebrated](#) by the MoE.

On 15 August 2023, on the second anniversary of the Taliban's seizure of Kabul, the Minister of Education delivered a [speech](#) presenting statistics on education in Afghanistan. Minister Agha claimed there were 15,000 madrasas operational in Afghanistan, alongside 19,000 other schools. He added that jihadi madrasas were operational in all 34 provinces. Days later, on 21 August 2023, the Deputy Minister of Education [claimed](#) that 339,950 students were currently enrolled in public and private madrasas, including 94,662 girls.

With most women and girls unable to pursue secondary or higher education, increasing numbers of female students have reportedly turned to madrasas, which have become a replacement of sorts for

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<sup>8</sup> For more information on public, private, registered and unregistered madrasas in Afghanistan, see AW's previous report: [Afghanistan's madrasa system under the Taliban](#).

<sup>9</sup> As of 2017, according to government statistics, there were some 13,000 unregistered madrasas operating in Afghanistan.

<sup>10</sup> Newly established religious schools aimed at teaching students about Islamic jihad as interpreted by the Taliban. Jihadi madrasas maintain a separate curriculum and operate independently from other private or public madrasas.

secular education. AW observed that some even claim to provide free English classes, mental health support, and family counselling, as seen on the sign outside the madrasa in the [picture](#) below.



*Figure: Female students of a girls' madrasa in Kandahar organised an excursion to the mountains. The shield of the school seen above indicates the madrasa is approved by the MoE. Source: [Twitter](#).*

In February 2023, religious scholars at a madrasa in Kandahar told [Reuters](#) that female attendance had doubled since 2021, with around 400 female students recorded in 2022. The doubling of female enrolment was also [reported](#) in two madrasas in Kabul.

Local sources also claim to have seen a surge in religious schools in the country, often due to the increase in women and girls' attendance. In March 2023, Hasht-e Subh, an Afghan news agency, talked to sources in Parwan province who [confirmed](#) an increase in the number of private religious schools in the province; the article noted, however, that many of these madrasas were unregistered.

### 5.3 Staffing changes

In 2023, there was a surge in hiring for religious schoolteachers across Afghanistan. There were also reports of mass dismissals at the MoE, some related to the shuttering of the teacher training institutes, others in the Education Supervision Department.

Other changes related to MoE staff in 2023 included reports of teachers' and lecturers' salaries not being paid, as well as additional requirements for teachers to adhere to a Sharia dress code.

### 5.3.1 Increase in recruitment for religious school teachers

In January 2023, the MoE [highlighted](#) that it had employed more than 40,000 teachers, including many women, over the past two years. Then, in June 2023, The Taliban's Minister of education [announced](#) that the Taliban's Supreme Leader had sanctioned the creation of 100,000 new teaching positions for religious educational institutions, such as madrasas, darul hufaz, and darul ulooms, with recruitment campaigns in [Kabul](#), [Balkh](#), [Logar](#), [Ghazni](#), [Samangan](#), [Maidan Wardak](#), [Herat](#), [Badakhshan](#), [Takhar](#), [Baghlan](#), [Panjshir](#), [Helmand](#), [Sar-e-Pul](#), [Jawzjan](#), [Parwan](#), [Kunar](#), [Badghis](#), [Paktika](#), [Paktia](#) and [Khost](#). AW did not observe a similar desire to recruit new teachers for secular schools.

### 5.3.2 Ministry of Education dismissals

Following the suspension of teacher training units across the country, [prominent media outlets reported](#) this move would result in approximately 4,000 people losing their jobs. According to statistics [provided](#) by Radio Azadi, in July there were 49 teacher training centres with 198 support centres operating across Afghanistan, with 3,600 teachers and 2,000 administrative and service personnel. While the Ministry announced that those at risk of losing their jobs would be appointed to other positions, many were [reportedly](#) not offered alternative employment by the Taliban<sup>11</sup>.

In October 2023, it was [reported](#) that the MoE had dismissed some of its professional employees in Bamyan – management positions in procurement, logistics, human resources, and financial and administrative departments – and replaced them with Taliban members and supporters. Sources quoted by RASC News said that many of the replacements were unqualified, inexperienced, and incapable of managing their roles.

In December 2023, the Purple Saturdays Movement<sup>12</sup> [alleged](#) that 5,000 employees of the MoE's Educational Supervision Department, [responsible](#) for monitoring the quality of educational and administrative processes across Afghanistan's 34 provinces, had been dismissed. The post [added](#) that many of those who lost their jobs had been employed by the previous government. Following the dismissals, a group of former staff members were seen [protesting](#) their dismissal in Samangan.

### 5.3.3 Unpaid salaries

In August 2023, some university instructors [claimed](#) that their salaries had not been paid for two years – since the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan. As of 11 December 2023, however, the Minister of Higher Education claimed that the issue had been resolved. Minister Nadeem [said](#) that university instructors who were pursuing doctoral or master's degrees in Afghanistan or abroad, who were experiencing “financial difficulties,” were now “being paid from the Ministry's budget.”

Throughout the year, AW also recorded claims that teachers' salaries were not being paid. For example, in December 2023, a [video](#) circulated online showing female teachers claiming that Kabul

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that, although the Taliban implemented the suspension of teacher training units across Afghanistan, this policy was developed by the former republican government.

<sup>12</sup> One of the prominent Afghan women's rights movements which advocates for equal rights including right to work and education.

Bank had not paid their salaries, but had paid their male colleagues' salaries. Meanwhile, the MoE [reported](#) that in some provinces, local businessmen were now paying some teachers' salaries.

#### 5.3.4 Sharia dress code

In 2023, teachers and MoE employees were subject to strict rules regulating their appearance. In April, an official letter [circulated](#) online, warning staff that those who did not comply with religious rules on appearance – wearing the proper hat and growing a beard, according to sources quoted by 8am media – and did not attend prayers, would be fired. A similar warning was seen in Sar-e-Pol. In October, the Department of Education circulated a letter [warning](#) 168 teachers and staff that they would be fired for not having a long beard.

These warnings follow official decrees from 2022 [requiring](#) male university professors, students and staff alike to wear the shalwar kameez, traditional Afghan attire.

### 5.4 Limited alternative options

Following the closure of secondary schools for girls, and the suspension of higher education for women, alternative options for education in Afghanistan exist, however, the space for these appeared to shrink in 2023. International NGOs that provided educational programming in certain provinces were ordered to halt operations; the future of these programmes remains uncertain. Some students who previously had opportunities to study abroad were denied these privileges in 2023, as some groups of male and female students were prevented from travelling by the Taliban. There were also reports of private schools closing throughout the country, reportedly for violations of gender segregation and hijab rules.

Although online and underground options exist for accessing secular education, the risks are great to those who offer and attend secret classes; similarly, Afghanistan suffers from some of the poorest internet quality in the world, significantly hampering students' ability to access online resources.

#### 5.4.1 Suspension of NGO-led educational programmes

On 27 April, 2023, the Taliban's Minister of Education issued an [order](#) suspending the activities of NGO-run educational institutions in Kandahar and Helmand provinces. At the time of the suspension, Tolo News [reported](#) that there were 176 NGO-supported education providers in the country, and that UNICEF had recently provided 5,000 classes to local students.

Then, in June 2023, KabulNow [reported](#) that Taliban authorities in Sar-e-Pol and Faryab provinces had ordered UNICEF, Save the Children and ACTED to cease their education programmes. UNICEF expressed [concern](#) over the ban, and told Reuters it was seeking clarification from the Taliban. UNICEF's Afghanistan spokesperson, Samantha Mort, added that over 500,000 children in Afghanistan, including 300,000 girls, would lose access to community-based quality education within a month if international NGOs were forced to cease education activities.

#### 5.4.2 Barrier to overseas study

In 2023, it was reported that the Taliban prevented some students, who received international



scholarships, from studying abroad. In a [video](#) from August 2023, a group of women with luggage can be seen, after reportedly being denied permission to travel by the Taliban. Etilaatroz then [reported](#) that the Taliban did not permit 100 female students to travel to Dubai from Kabul Airport, some of whom were accompanied by a male relative.

Meanwhile, in November 2023, a number of [male and female students](#) who [received scholarships](#) from Russia claimed that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) prevented them from travelling abroad to study by confiscating their passports.

### 5.4.3 Closure of private schools

On 14 November 2023, Afghanistan International [reported](#) that the Taliban closed at least seven private schools in Herat and [prevented](#) girls from entering classrooms. In some of these schools, girls reportedly learned English, German and IT skills. AW geolocated one of the schools (below), seen in a [video](#) shared by the outlet on X (formerly Twitter), showing the sealed entrances of three private schools in Herat. Then, on 2 December 2023, [photos circulated](#) on social media showing the sealed gates of the private Ferdowsi Institute of Health, alongside claims that it had been closed by Taliban authorities due to a lack of gender segregation and poor adherence to hijab rules.



Figure: A photo in front of the “MUSLIM” English Language Institute building, from Google Maps (upper left); screenshot from Afghanistan International [video](#), showing the building and sealing order on the entrance gate (right); and the building on the satellite map (lower left) [34.347612, 62.207815].

### 5.4.4 Underground and online classes

On 20 December 2023, Radio Free Europe published an [article](#) describing underground schools run by the Pohana Fund, an NGO founded by Wazhma Tokhi, an Afghan education and women’s rights activist living in exile. Tokhi claimed that around 1,000 teenage girls receive education in 21 underground schools, many of which are hosted in homes in Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Zabul, Paktia, Khost, Logar, and Kabul. She added that Islamic teachings were a key component of the curriculum; this is to ensure that local communities allow their teenage daughters to attend the secret schools, however, students are also taught maths, science, and literature.

Other options available include attending online and radio-based classes. [LEARN Afghanistan](#), a non-profit organisation, runs community-based schools in Yalda and Soraya, each with over 60 children enrolled; it also offers online classes for grades one through 12, in Dari and Pashto, and lessons are also available via radio, which is widely used in rural areas. Similarly, [Roshni e Omid](#) is an education platform that provides online education in Afghanistan. However, online education is often [hindered](#) by poor internet quality – in 2023, Afghanistan had the slowest mobile internet speed globally, and the second slowest fixed internet speed<sup>13</sup>.

## 5.5 Violence and mistreatment of teachers and students

In 2023, AW recorded at least 28 visual materials concerning the mistreatment of and violence against teachers and students in Afghanistan. Some claims demonstrated how minorities and vulnerable groups are targeted in the education sector, with [Shias](#), and [Panjshiri students](#) and [staff](#) facing dismissals or [reassignment to lower positions](#), [arrests](#), and [WARNING: GRAPHIC] [killings](#).

In September 2023, for example, [prominent media](#) outlets reported that a 16-year-old Hazara-Shiite girl was abducted from the darul uloom she attended by a male teacher. It was further reported that the teacher was the nephew of a Taliban official in the Bamyán Education Department. Also in September, AW [geolocated](#) a [video](#) (below) showing armed Taliban members threatening and hitting a male student in front of the Faryab University gate in Maymana City. Then, in December, Taliban forces [reportedly arrested](#) two Panjshiri university professors from private institutions in Kabul.



*Figure: A photo showing the geolocated incident of a Taliban member threatening and hitting a male student in front of the Faryab University gate in Maymana City [35.910192, 64.788604].*

<sup>13</sup> According to Ookla, a Seattle-based company that compiles global internet speeds. In 2023, Afghanistan ranked last, out of 137 countries, for mobile internet speed, and second last, out of 180 countries for fixed internet speed.

### 5.5.1 Silencing alternative voices on education

In 2023, students and teachers who criticised the Taliban were often met with repression and arrest. In speeches throughout the year, the Minister for Higher Education issued threats and warnings towards alternative voices in the education sector. In March 2023, Minister Nadeem [said](#): “If you are hard-headed and make problems for the people of Afghanistan based on strangers’ agendas, then we are ready to confront you, and we will suppress you.” He added that any who undermine the government “via tongue, pen or practice” were “committing rebellion” and “deserved death.”

In December 2023, the Taliban arrested a student of the Faculty of Philosophy at Bamyán University for [criticising](#) the lack of security in the province in a speech at his graduation ceremony. Similarly, the Taliban reportedly [detained](#) 25 high school students in Kunar during their graduation ceremony for signing each other’s uniforms and painting the tricolour Afghan flag on their faces.

Several claims recorded by AW in 2023 suggest that the Taliban actively targeted individuals who advocated for women and girls’ education. Ismail Mashan, a university [professor](#) and manager of a private university, publicly advocated for women’s access to higher education by [distributing books](#) in the streets to support ongoing education and [tearing](#) up his degrees on live TV in solidarity with women’s right to education. On 2 February 2023, he was [arrested](#) and [beaten](#) by Taliban forces; a month later, he was [released](#) on bail, and immediately hospitalised for “vomiting blood and mental health conditions.” According to a crowdfunding campaign on the Aseel<sup>14</sup>, Mashal is now wheelchair-bound and living in an “unfavourable mental state.”



*Figure: To the left, Professor Ismail Mashal before his arrest. To the right, Professor Mashal in a wheelchair following his release from prison. Source: [X \(formerly Twitter\)](#).*

In March 2023, Matiullah Wesa, prominent education activist and founder of PenPath, a civil society movement which actively promotes girls’ education in Afghanistan, was [arrested](#) by Taliban forces for “propaganda against the government.” Wesa was [released](#) from prison in October 2023, following a court ruling which found no evidence for the allegation made against him by the Taliban.

<sup>14</sup>Aseel is a crowdfunding platform headquartered in Washington DC, focused on uplifting artisans, and underserved communities in Afghanistan and Turkey.

Even small-scale dissent resulted in severe penalties. In November 2023, a civil activist was [arrested](#) for criticising the Taliban over the closure of girls' schools in a comment on Facebook.

### 5.5.2 Mysterious poisonings

In 2023, AW recorded four claims of mysterious poisonings at schools in Afghanistan. One reportedly occurred at a boys' school in Faryab, while the remaining three occurred at girls' schools in Sar-e-Pol, Farah, and Takhar. AW also recorded visual materials related to the verified poisoning in Sar-e-Pol. This incident occurred in June, and was [widely reported](#) by [local media](#). Taliban [authorities confirmed the incident](#), and announced an investigation had been launched to catch the perpetrators, however, as of January 2024, no information was available regarding arrests of the individuals responsible. Based on these claims, AW estimates that at least 137 students and teachers were poisoned at schools in 2023, with the highest number in Sar-e Pol (between 80 and 89 individuals), followed by Farah (40), Faryab (9), and Takhar (8).

AW recorded a similar incident in October 2022, when [50-70](#) female students at Kabul University fell ill, with some being admitted to [hospital](#). While some students [claimed](#) that the illness resulted from an intentional poisoning, it is unclear whether this is the case; it is possible the girls fell ill as a result of food poisoning from poor food hygiene at the university. Moreover, AW notes that cases of school poisonings are not unique to the Taliban era, they also [occurred](#) under the republican government.

### 5.5.3 Mistreatment of female teachers and students

Female teachers and students appeared to face additional repressions in 2023. In March, two female students were killed and eleven injured when a grenade exploded in a primary school classroom in Jawzjan province. It is unclear how the grenade came to be in the classroom; Taliban officials claimed that the school children found and were playing with the grenade when it exploded, however other sources told [8am media](#) that the Taliban was involved in the explosion.

In May 2023, there were [reports](#) that two female teachers were beaten and detained by Taliban forces in Bamyan. Local sources told [VOC News](#) that the teachers, who were affiliated with a local darul uloom, had gone to welcome the Minister of Education who was visiting to inaugurate a jihadi madrasa.

Then, in August, there were [reports](#) that a pregnant teacher was murdered and dismembered in Imam Sahib, Kunduz province. Local sources confirmed to the media that the victim was a 28-year-old who taught in a private school in the region. Local Taliban authorities [confirmed](#) the attack, but denied that the victim was an educator.

In October, when the MoE [announced](#) that it would hold celebrations in Kabul for International Teacher's Day, it did not specify that female teachers and students would be banned from attending, however, based on [photos](#) from the [event](#), none appear to have been in attendance. Female teachers and students were also barred from attending celebrations in [Balkh](#) and [Takhar](#); in these cases, female teachers were also not permitted to hold their own separate celebrations with female students.

On the day of the celebrations, the MoE shared a written [message from the Minister of Education](#), extending "heartfelt greetings to all the teachers, students, and educators of the country" for their continuous efforts and valuable services "in the holy path of education." The statement noted that the

MoE was “committed to providing modern and Islamic sciences to its citizens in all regions of Afghanistan in the light of its educational plans and programs” and claimed that the Ministry was trying to defend the rights of the teachers “as much as possible”. Meanwhile, the exclusion of women and girls from the celebrations served to further erase them from academia.

## 5.6 Women and girls’ access to education dependent on local authorities

Since their return to power in 2021, Taliban authorities have restricted girls’ and women’s access to education, preventing them from attending [secondary](#) schools and barring them from [higher education](#), with some exceptions. Girls above primary school age are permitted to study in madrasas, and, in some provinces, are still allowed to [study health sciences](#) and attend medical institutes for nursing, midwifery, and dentistry. However, these opportunities often depend on local authorities’ application of Taliban restrictions, which has been uneven throughout 2023.

On 4 August 2023, BBC Persian [reported](#) that in some provinces, local authorities from the Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Evil, limited girls’ education based on age; principals of girls’ schools were allegedly directed to send girls above the third grade home. Similar [incidents](#) were [reported](#) in Ghazni; according to sources quoted, the Taliban reportedly instructed “taller” girls to remain at home. These policies did not appear to be universally enforced across the country.

Meanwhile, girls who graduated prior to the implementation of restrictions on higher education have [allegedly](#) faced barriers to obtaining their academic documents, due to requirements that female students be accompanied by a male guardian for administrative procedures at universities.

On 28 January 2023, a letter issued by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) [surfaced](#) on social media, ordering private universities and higher educational institutes not to enrol female applicants in university entrance exams until further notice, adding that violations would result in legal penalties. The Head of Press and Public Relations of the Union of Private Universities, [expressed](#) concerns about the policy, noting that there were nearly 70,000 female students attending private universities.

Despite the prohibition of girls enrolling in university entrance exams, there appear to have been different interpretations of these orders by local authorities in 2023. In May, it was [reported](#) that entrance exam applications had been distributed to girls in Kabul, Nangarhar, Parwan, Takhar, Kunduz, Badakhshan, Kandahar, and Helmand. Moreover, girls who graduated high school in 2022 also [reportedly](#) received entrance exam applications, and AW was able to verify that the MoHE distributed entrance exam applications to male and female applicants in five provinces in 2023.

Moreover, girls’ access to higher education via entry examinations often depended on the subject of study and the decisions of local Taliban authorities. On 3 May 2023, Radio Television Afghanistan [reported](#) that the Ministry of Public Health organised an entrance exam in health sciences for more than 3,000 male and female applicants in Balkh province. [According](#) to the Taliban’s Head of Public Health in Balkh, Najibullah Tawana, 65 percent of applicants were women and girls; he added that more seats had been given to women due to the imminent need to control the rising death toll among women in remote villages, where female healthcare providers are scarce. However, in Kandahar, one of the institutes providing training in midwifery and health sciences to 50 women, was shuttered for a second time in [November 2023](#), after female students were previously called back to study in [May](#)

[2023](#), following the ban on women attending higher education in December 2022.

In [other instances](#), however, the Taliban did not allow female medical students to participate in exit exams administered by Afghanistan’s Medical Council, which allow medical students to pursue specialisation and eventually gain their medical licence. Although the Taliban has promised to organise a separate exit exam for women, no such exam has materialised as of January 2024.

## 6 Conclusion

The content covered in this report is not a comprehensive analysis of every comment made by senior Taliban officials and the MoE, and every claim recorded by AW regarding Afghanistan’s education sector in 2023. Rather, it aims to demonstrate the complexities of the sector, identify Taliban priorities, and examine the realities on the ground.

In 2023, the Taliban focused on improving educational infrastructure to enable their vision of education in Afghanistan, opening several schools, madrasas, and other religious education institutions throughout the year. The Taliban also upgraded existing infrastructure in several schools, to ensure safer drinking water and hygiene practices. Despite this, there were several reports of destruction of educational property in 2023 – some school buildings were physically damaged or destroyed, while others were converted into Taliban facilities, like military bases. In some cases, secular facilities were converted into madrasas, replacing one form of education with another. The Taliban also ordered all universities to clear their libraries books written about and by “political opponents,” including many from the republican era. Similarly, books considered to violate Islamic principles were removed from primary school libraries.

The Taliban also aimed to share the message that they were focused on ensuring widespread access to education. Although it is clear that efforts were made, in extending educational opportunities to remote communities and returning refugee children from Pakistan, space for women and girls’ education continued to shrink in 2023.

Since the end of 2022, women have been barred from attending higher education, and since August 2021, girls have been unable to attend school beyond the sixth grade. Often, their only option for ongoing education is to attend a girls’ madrasa. In 2023, a number of private girls’ schools were closed by the Taliban, as were NGO-funded educational programmes across certain provinces, further eroding access to education. Meanwhile, those who graduated from high schools were barred from applying to write university entrance exams, limiting prospects for future education and employment. Although there were some exceptions, they were applied unevenly across the country, and mainly only permitted further study in health sciences. Despite this, senior Taliban officials urged patience around the issue of girls’ education, noting that it had only been temporarily suspended, and that they were working to “create a suitable environment” in which it could be reinstated.

In 2023, the Taliban promoted the narrative that they were supportive of both religious and scientific education, with many senior officials noting that, in tandem, these disciplines served to strengthen the fabric of Afghan society. Despite this, emphasis throughout 2023 appeared to be on religious

education. Curriculum reforms focused on removing materials considered to conflict with Sharia principles while aligning with “global standards.” Moreover, the Taliban’s mass recruitment campaign for 100,000 new teachers focused solely on hiring religious educators. Taken together, these elements suggest that while the Taliban aims to promote the narrative that the group is supportive of modern science alongside Islamic religion, in practice, religion takes precedence.

Overall, it appears that in 2023, Taliban policies continued to erode elements of Afghanistan’s Republican-era education system – from curricula reform to repurposing existing infrastructure into religious education facilities. The group did not significantly amend the limited space for women and girls, and aimed to shut down foreign efforts in the education sector. Similarly, the group aimed to shut down critics of its education policies, through repression and imprisonment. While some of the on-the-ground realities explored in this report differ from the narratives the Taliban sought to portray, they often align with the Taliban’s worldview and interpretation of Sharia; moreover, they likely reflect the Taliban’s desired role for education within the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.



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