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HOW THE EMIRATE WANTS TO BE PERCEIVED:
A closer look at the Accountability Programme

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As the Islamic Emirate approaches the three-year mark of its rule in Afghanistan, it is presumably readying itself for another round of public accounting, as it has done in the past two summers. These televised sessions, while overwhelming in number, provide a fairly detailed overview of the Emirate's policies and preoccupations, particularly in terms of what it wants the media, the nation and the world to know. Ahead of the next round, AAN's Martine van Bijlert (with input from the AAN team) lays out what can be learned from last year's sessions. Key themes include the consolidation of an Islamic system, the push towards both self-sufficiency and connectedness, the expansion of a digitalised administration and the rooting out of what it sees as the ill effects of the last twenty years. The pressing issue of women's rights, including access to education also featured heavily – not in the presentations, but very much so in the Q&A sessions with journalists afterwards. Comparing this overview with what the Emirate chooses to showcase in the next sessions will be a good indicator of how its focus may have evolved over the last year.

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT

The Emirate's second round of accountability sessions took place in the summer of 2023 and marked the end of its second year in power. Over the course of five weeks, from 23 July to 22 August 2023, 42 government ministries and departments discussed their missions and aims, their place within the Emirate, the achievements of the previous year and their plans for the next. The Prime Minister's Office chaired the introductory session but did not provide a report of its own. Conspicuously absent from the presentations were the Ministry of Finance, the General Directorate of Intelligence and the Office of the Supreme Leader – three key bodies when it comes to the economic, security and ideological shape of the Emirate.

Although the more technical and infrastructural departments often provided fairly extensive descriptions of their activities, concrete overall figures on budgets, spending and revenues were scarce. The financial and numerical details that were provided generally did match the information available from the mini-budget of the last three months of 1402 (December 2021 to March 2022) and the figures provided by the World Bank (see AAN reporting here and here). However, the overall picture of what the Emirate prioritises in terms of how it spends its money remains opaque. An accountability session from the Ministry of Finance was greatly missed.

Like all press conferences, the sessions were, in the first place, an exercise in 'impression management', which is also precisely where their value lies. The depth and scope of the sessions, on their own and combined, provide important insights into what the Emirate cares about, how it wants to be perceived and by whom. To this end, the AAN team has watched, transcribed and analysed the televised presentations, pulled out key themes that stood out and presented them here, drawing heavily on quotes.[1] In doing so, this report provides a layered picture of how the Emirate spoke about itself at the end of its second year in power and how it wanted to be perceived by the Afghan nation. During the year, as we continued to follow the Emirate's media messaging, it became clear that the themes that emerged continued to be at the heart of Emirate communication as they featured

[1] The quotes in this report originate from the televised sessions as broadcast by RTA state television. They have been transcribed, translated and lightly edited for clarity and flow. Although great care has been taken to be as accurate as possible, there may be errors or misunderstandings.

heavily in officials' statements, speeches and interviews. In that respect, this report is both a snapshot of the state of play as it stood in the summer of 2023 at the end of the Emirate's second year in power and an illustration of the Emirate's consistency in its messaging, across institutions and over time.

After an introduction, the second section of this report **sets the scene**, describing the stated aims of the sessions and how the Afghan media were told to report on them. There was a clear expectation – and exhortation – that the media play a cooperative and constructive role as the Emirate sought to communicate its achievements to the Afghan nation, keeping "national interests" in mind and preventing "negative propaganda." However, it was notable how seriously the journalists still took their responsibility of bringing the nation's questions to the government, asking specific – non-hostile but probing – questions about contentious topics, including, most prominently, access to education for women and girls.

In its third section, the report **compares the Emirate's accountability sessions with those of the Republic**, noting that this round was significantly more compact – 42 presentations, compared to the 65 in the last year of the Islamic Republic. Many of the 'missing' institutions have simply been folded back into the ministries they were carved out of or most closely related to, in an apparent move to streamline a bloated government. Others were abolished or repurposed, as discussed below in section three.

The fourth section looks at the Emirate's **focus on economic self-sufficiency** and economic development as a pillar of stability and political legitimacy, both domestically and as a centrepiece in its international relations. The fifth section lays out how the Emirate has sought to **establish, consolidate and promote an Islamic system** in all layers of government and society. While key roles have been given to the ministries of virtue and vice, justice, (higher) education and various other bodies, it is clear that all departments are considered part of the project, and reported as such. The report's sixth section describes how various officials **criticised the Republic**, focusing, for instance, on how the former government had been beholden to foreign occupiers, had empowered usurpers and presided over corruption. The chapter then lays out in some detail how different departments within the Emirate have been transitioning in practice from the previous regime to this one.

A seventh section lays out how the **understanding of rights within the Emirate's system** of governance shapes how accountability is viewed and functions in

practice. Although officials explicitly presented the Emirate as a protector of rights, including the rights of women, it was clear that the rights of God (which require the promotion of virtue and prevention of vice) would always supersede the rights of people (which are expected to be dealt with through the courts and complaints mechanisms). Section eight delves into the themes of **digitalisation, e-governance and database creation**, where most initiatives appear to be holdovers from the previous government, either maintained or expanded, but with a clear preoccupation now on data efficiency and connectivity. The presentations appeared to point to efforts to increase the level of mapping and control.

Acting Deputy Minister for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, Saeed Ahmad Shahidkhel, speaks during the ministry's accountability session in Kabul.
Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 14 August 2023

Section nine discusses the Emirate's mixed and sometimes contradictory **attitudes towards the outside world**: it wants good relations, especially economically, with the rest of the world – starting with the neighbours and region and fanning out from there – but also views the outside world, in particular the West, as a possible source of hostile propaganda and continuing corrupting influences. How various

departments described their dealings with counterparts across the world is also discussed in this section.

Section ten discusses the contentious topic of **women's roles and rights**. It lays out how the Emirate was presented as a *protector* of women's rights, for instance, on issues of inheritance, while officials were largely silent on various unresolved issues, such as women and girls' access to education, as well as other rights. However, this topic featured heavily in the Q&A sessions afterwards, illustrating how high on the agenda this remains for both the media and the wider public.

The final section notes how the **themes reflected in last year's sessions** have largely remained the same in the administration's communication throughout the following months. The overall context, however, has evolved and it will be interesting to see how this affects this year's presentations. The report ends with a brief discussion of developments and dynamics that may shape the forthcoming accountability sessions, as officials provide an updated overview of how the Emirate wishes to present its progress, challenges and place in the world.

SETTING THE SCENE: AIM AND SCOPE OF THE SESSIONS, TASKING THE MEDIA

The introductory session by the Prime Minister's Office laid out the overall aim of the accountability programme – to provide transparency by sharing information with the people, through the media – and was particularly geared towards the media. The speakers made it clear that the gathered journalists were expected to keep "national interests" in mind while reporting. After stressing that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) "supports the freedom of speech and journalists within the framework of Islamic principles," the head of the Prime Minister's Office elaborated on the expected role of the media:

> *We know that the media is a bridge between the government and the nation; through the media, the voices of the nation reach the government and the words of the officials reach the people. This strengthens interaction and cooperation between the nation and the government, ensures transparency in the work and leads to good governance. The government, the nation and the*

> *media have joint responsibilities in the rebuilding, development and prosperity of the country, which we must do in the right way.… The responsibilities of media representatives are to provide true public awareness, transfer truths to the people and prevent negative propaganda.*

This instruction to keep national interests in mind and avoid "negative propaganda" was reiterated by deputy spokesperson Bilal Karimi when he admonished the media to stick to the principles of journalism and act in the best interest of Afghanistan:

> *If the esteemed media organise their activities in the framework of Islamic principles, based on the benefits and interests of the country and according to their own journalistic principles, we're sure there'll be no gap between the system of governance [nezam] and the media. The role of the media is vital and foundational in every system as a major pillar in the stability of its affairs. Therefore, we're committed to ensuring that the media acts according to their own journalistic principles and the highest interests of the country, avoids spreading rumours and continues to report properly, impartially and professionally.*

Later, acting Minister of Justice Sheikh Abdul Hakim Sharaee made a similar point when he described the media as "the eyes, ears and voice of the government and the people" and called their work a "propaganda jihad":

> *I have some advice for you, media, as brothers. See, I have seen no example in the world in recent times like our government … in which both national and Islamic values are safeguarded. Everyone has their own responsibility – the minister, the department head, the boss and his subordinate, the common man – all have their own responsibilities and you, the media, also have your own responsibility. Your occupation is not an ordinary one. I call the media's efforts a propaganda jihad, as long as it is done according to journalism principles and sharia law.*
>
> *According to the principles of sharia, we should first correct our intention and find honesty and good faith within ourselves. When the media respects this, it's a beautiful thing [zinat] and its work will be akin to worship [ebadat] and a propaganda jihad [tablighati jhad]. Together, we must uphold and defend this regime. This is our obligation as Muslims and Afghans. For instance, when publishing a report, the negative and positive aspects should be considered. If it has positive aspects, we should try to publish it; if it has negative aspects, we should refrain from publishing it.*

Afghan journalists attend the Ministry of Higher Education's accountability session in Kabul.
Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 21 August 2023

In this view, rather than a check on the government, the media is explicitly seen as part of the larger project of rebuilding the country and maintaining the nezam (system or order), a responsibility it shares with the government and the nation. These sentiments are not new, nor are they exclusive to the Islamic Emirate. During the Islamic Republic, there had also been regular 'requests' to the media to consider national interests and the nation's morale when reporting. The media were asked to focus more on the Republic's achievements and less on security incidents and criticism levelled against the government. Back then, however, the messaging was less unified and the spectre of censorship and oppression seemed more diffuse.

All in all, it was clear that the media was expected to understand and relay to the nation how far the Emirate had come and how hard it was trying. The repeated insistence that as long as journalists abide by Islamic principles and national interests, the government would support and cooperate with them, was an implied reminder of the limitations of its goodwill.

Despite these exhortations to the media to support the system, individual journalists did use the Q&A sessions to ask pointed questions, often relating to specific cases and concerns. In doing so, they clearly sought to fulfil their role as the voice of the people, raising issues of concern and asking for more information, but although they received some figures and details and further explanations, the most pressing questions were generally sidestepped and left unanswered.

CONTEXT: HOW THE EMIRATE'S SESSIONS COMPARE WITH THE REPUBLIC'S

The Islamic Emirate's 2023 accountability programme was not the first of its kind. In 2022, after its first year in power, the Emirate had also convened a similar series of press conferences, although it had not yet explicitly framed them as an accountability programme. Before that, the accountability programme had been a regular feature under the Islamic Republic as part of the government's communication strategy. Recordings of previous sessions going as far back as 2019 can still be found on the Government Media and Information Centre's (GMIC) YouTube channel, now in use by the IEA.[2] The accountability sessions under the Republic took place in spring, around the time of the Afghan New Year. The two IEA sessions both took place in July and August and focused on the Emirate's achievements in its first and second year in power since 15 August 2021. The third round is expected to take place in the summer of 2024.

One of the most notable changes, when comparing the Emirate's accountability programme with the last one under the Republic, is the sharp decrease in institutions – from at least 65 bodies presenting their plans and achievements during the Republic's last session in spring 2021 to 42 presentations under the Emirate (not counting the opening session by the Prime Minister's Office).

[2] Both the Emirate and Republic-era accountability sessions can be found on GMIC's YouTube channel. The Emirate's 2023 sessions can be found here. The 2022 IEA sessions did not have a separate hashtag, but can be found here, mixed in with the 2023 sessions. The Republic-era 2020 and 2021 sessions can be found here, again, mixed together, and at least some of the 2019 Republic-era sessions can be found here. This report is based on transcripts and translations by AAN researchers of the sessions as broadcast on national television and/or posted on the GMIC's YouTube channel.

Officials speaking at the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's Accountability sessions in 2021, from left to right (top row) Dr Karima Hamed Faryabi, Minister of Economy; Haroon Chakhansuri, acting Minister of Mines and Petroleum; Khalid Payenda, Minister of Finance; Mohibullah Samim, Minister of Borders and Tribal Affairs; (middle row) Sadat Mansoor Naderi, Minster for Peace; Masooma Khawari, Minister of Communications and Information Technology; Haneef Atmar, Minister of Foreign Affairs; Hasina Safi, Minister of Women's Affairs; (bottom row) Ghizaal Haress, Ombudsperson; Major General Masoud Andarabi, Minister of Interior; Nader Nadery, Chairman of the Civil Service Commission; Abbas Basir, Minister of Higher Education.
Source: Government Information Center (GMIC) via YouTube

Some of these Republic-era institutions were abolished, including most prominently, the Secretariates of the Wolesi Jirga and Meshrano Jirga (the lower and upper houses of parliament), the State Ministry for Peace Affairs, the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), the Independent Commission for Overseeing the Implementation of the Constitution (ICSOC), the Ombudsperson's Office and the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA). The Attorney General's Office had initially been retained before it was also abolished and turned into the Directorate of Supervision and Prosecution of the Decrees and Orders of the Supreme Leader, just before the 2023 accountability sessions took place.[3]

[3] The IEA did appoint an acting Attorney General, Mawlawi Shamsuddin Shariati, who in August 2022, announced that the investigation and prosecution of crimes was no longer within the purview of the Attorney General's Office (AGO) and that cases should be handed over to the courts (see here). In July 2023, the AGO was officially abolished. According to the Emirate's spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahed, this was done to avoid "the congestion of departments." He added that although the department's structure and methodology had changed, the staff remained the same and would now be employed at the Directorate of Supervision of the Implementation of Decrees.

The abolished Ministry of Women's Affairs saw its assets handed over, early on, to the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (MoPVPV); the fate of MOWA's staff, however, is unclear. The Ministry of Virtue and Vice (commonly referred to as virtue and vice or by its Arabic name Amr bil-Maruf) has in many ways, as we shall see below, subsumed and reframed the responsibilities of the Republic-era's Ministry of Women's Affairs, the Human Rights Commission and Ombudsperson, given that it sees itself as the main custodian of the nation's rights and regulations, restrictions on behaviour, and the place to which citizens can address complaints and criticism.

Officials speaking at the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's Accountability sessions in 2023, from left to right (top row) Khairullah Khairkhwa, acting Minister of Information and Culture; Noorullah Noori, Minister of Borders and Tribal Affairs; Hafez Aziz al-Rahman, Head of the National Environmental Protection Agency; Bakht Rahman Sharafat, General Director of the Afghanistan Railway Authority; (middle row) Qalandar Ibad, acting Minister of Health; Nooruddin Azizi, acting Minister of Commerce and Industry; Hamdullah Nemani, acting Minister of Urban Development and Housing; Hedayatullah Badri, acting Governor of the Central Bank; (bottom row) Abdul Hakim Sharei, acting Minister of Justice; Fasihuddin Fitrat, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces; Attaullah Umari, acting Minister of Agriculture; Shahabuddin Delawar, Minister of Mines and Petroleum.
Source: Government Information Center (GMIC) via YouTube

Most of the other departments that were no longer represented in the accountability sessions have simply been folded back into the ministries they were carved out of or most closely related to, in an apparent move to streamline a bloated government (see Box 1 for more detail). Since then, at least eight more

independent institutions have been merged into ministries to "prevent structural inflation and reduce expenses."[4]

Rather than setting up new systems for its state, the Emirate has sought to leverage, maximise and repurpose the existing Republic-era bureaucratic processes and resources. It largely uses the same websites, manuals, databases, recruitment and procurement policies, financial software, communication systems and bureaucratic codes – albeit under a different name, logo and letterhead and often with an added calendar.[5] As a result, the Emirate inherited a bureaucracy that, for all its flaws, was, technically, largely functional, much more so than the shell of a bureaucracy it tried to run in the 1990s. The movement that took over the government in August 2021 had also developed and adapted since its emergence almost 30 years earlier and was organisationally much more intricate and sophisticated than it was during the first Emirate. (In the view of some observers, greater technical or political sophistication automatically implies that a group or system must also have become more politically moderate or Westernised. However, as seen in many places, none of these features – sophistication, moderation and Westernisation – are necessarily linked.)

While retaining most of the Republic-era bureaucracy, the Emirate's transition has also involved a slow and sweeping review of existing structures, laws and regulations to ensure they comply with the administration's views on sharia law and what the political order, the nezam, needs in order to survive and thrive. Departments have been added to ensure the dissemination and monitoring of new rules. A focus on digitalisation and the use of connected databases (more on which below) shows a preoccupation with organisation and control, particularly when it comes to revenue collection, government spending and monitoring of both government employees and the wider population.

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[4] In May 2024, the Supreme Leader ordered the merging of the Medical Council, Afghanistan Food and Drug Authority (AFDA), Afghanistan Railway Authority (ARA), the central oil and gas laboratories of the National Standards Council, the central and provincial food laboratories, National Olympic Committee and Directorate of Vocational Training with their relevant ministries (see here). At around the same time, the establishment of a new Independent Authority of Emirate Corporations was announced that aimed to reactivate state corporations that had been damaged or destroyed during the decades of war.

[5] The Islamic Emirate uses two calendars in many of its official documents, the Afghan solar calendar *(hijri shamsi)* which starts on 21 March and is currently in the year 1403, and the Arabic Islamic lunar calendar *(hijri qamari)* which is 10 to 11 days shorter and is currently in the year 1445. Both date from the Prophet Muhammad's flight to Medina in CE 622.

Box 1

Many of the government bodies that participated in the Republic's final accountability programme in 2021, but did not make presentations during the latest Emirate sessions in 2023, still exist albeit in a different form. These include:

- The Independent Directorate for Local Governance (IDLG) was established as an independent entity in 2007 under the Republic and has now been brought back under the Ministry of Interior.
- The Access to Information Commission is now the Directorate for Information Access in the Ministry of Information and Culture.
- The Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission has been folded into the General Directorate of Administrative Affairs (see here).
- Bodies linked to specific projects, such as the Operation and Support Office of the President for National Development (worked on construction projects in the presidential palace and later also Darulaman Palace) and the Capital Region Development Authority (it used to be the Deh Sabz City Development Authority) have probably ceased to exist altogether.
- The USAID-supported Afghanistan Urban Water Supply and Sewage Corporation (AUWSS), which at the time was described as a "commercialized state enterprise for water supply and sewerage," has probably been subsumed into the Ministry of Water and Power.
- The General Directorate of Physical Education and Sports of Afghanistan has merged with the National Olympic Committee.
- The General Directorate of Cohesion of Nomadic Affairs (described elsewhere as the General Directorate of Kuchi Affairs) seems to have merged with the Ministry of Border and Tribal Affairs.
- The National Procurement Directorate is still part of the General Directorate of Administrative Affairs but did not present separately at the IEA accountability sessions.
- The Afghanistan Telecom Regulation Authority (ATRA) is currently part of the Ministry of Telecommunication and was briefly mentioned in its presentation.
- Ariana Afghan Airlines is still operational and presumably still state-owned, but did not appear at the accountability sessions.
- The Afghan Civil Aviation Authority has probably been folded into the Ministry of Transport and Aviation. Its website is no longer active.
- The Energy Services Regulatory Authority (NESRA) re-joined the National Water Management Authority (NWMA) to re-establish the Ministry of Water and Power. The ministry had been abolished and divided by decree in early 2020.
- Kabul province, which presented under the Republic, obviously still exists. It did not, however, make a presentation at the IEA accountability sessions.
- Kabul Municipality did make a presentation during the IEA sessions, possibly illustrating a change in focus from projects, such as New Kabul City, to revenue collection.
- The Afghanistan Medical Council was re-approved by the IEA as an independent department with a budget (see here). It has since been merged with MoPH again (see footnote 4). It was briefly mentioned in the Ministry of Justice session and the Q&A session of the MoPH in the context of medical exams for women.
- It is unclear what happened to the Nuclear Energy Agency. The IEA did name a new head in its second round of appointments in September 2021, but the ANEA website appears to be offline. The agency did not present at the accountability sessions.

A FOCUS ON ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY

The first substantive presentation was by the Ministry of Economy. Acting Deputy Minister Abdul Latif Nazari kicked off by describing a theory of self-sufficiency as the basis of the Emirate's economic diplomacy (see also a brief discussion of the presentation in this AAN report). Nazari explained that:

> *The international system is anarchic and lacks a powerful authority. Because the sources of power and economy are limited, there's always chaos, conflict and tension among states trying to acquire maximum national interests. Based on this reality … the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has carefully considered this theory in its economic diplomacy. We want to use and be supported by the potential inside Afghanistan. We don't consider ourselves dependent on foreign aid. We want to have good relations with the world based on mutual interest, but our main principle of economy is based on the theory of self-sufficiency.*

He described seven principles of the Emirate's economic diplomacy: 1) knowledge of international markets; 2) identification and categorisation of economic partners ("we may have political tensions with a country, but we can be economic friends based on mutual economic interests"); 3) an economic outlook document; 4) economic development as a tool of legitimacy; 5) Afghanistan as a regional hub for trade; 6) the lifting and neutralising of sanctions and; 7) systematisation of NGO activities based on domestic needs and national interests.

In the first year after the Islamic Emirate took power, ensuring Afghanistan's economic survival had been the priority, he explained: "Despite sanctions and pressures, we prepared a document [plan] to prevent economic collapse. Even though it was part of the strategic plans of some countries, the economy did not collapse because we prevented it." The economic document or plan, he said, had focused on economic development, controlling the inflation rate, transparent tax collection, monitoring ports and customs, keeping the afghani stable and controlling prices, such as that of gas and fuel.

In the second year, the focus had been on boosting the economy, which he explicitly framed as a tool of political legitimacy: "Because economic development reduces the distance between the people and the government, we use both economic growth and economic expansion as important tools to gain legitimacy.

This is why we want to improve the people's livelihoods." (This, in turn, is reminiscent of the counterinsurgency strategies under the Republic, which aimed to improve governance and service delivery to 'win hearts and minds' and gain greater legitimacy.)

The importance of self-sufficiency was also reflected in the presentation of the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, one of the key ministries in this regard. Acting Minister of Mines, Sheikh Shahabuddin Delawar, explained:

> *The revenue [of the mining sector] will be used in economic development and to provide comfort to the people, such as by building infrastructure and implementing development projects.… The Ministry of Mines and Petroleum tries to build roads and dams and the Qush Tepa canal, which will be able to irrigate millions of acres of land so that Afghanistan can become self-sufficient in agriculture and electricity production and the government can rely on its own revenue.… We control mining revenues, the extraction of which started under the previous government and [from that] we pay the salaries and expenses of the national army, the Ministry of Interior, the General Directorate of Intelligence agency and millions of government employees.*

Apart from relying heavily on domestic production and revenue collection, the Emirate is counting on several large multilateral projects to boost economic development. These include the TAPI (Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) Gas Pipeline, which is a project to deliver natural gas to Afghanistan and on to Pakistan and India, CASA-1000 (the Central Asia-South Asia power project, which will transmit electricity generated from renewable energy sources in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and onwards to Pakistan) and the Trans-Afghan Railway.

The administration is also focussed on getting sanctions lifted, as Economy Minister Nazari explained:

> *Some countries have sanctioned us, for all kinds of reasons, against international law. Therefore, we've added the lifting and neutralising of sanctions to our work agenda, which means we've used diplomatic and legal channels to try to gain the satisfaction of the international community to release our money and lift the banking restrictions. Of the countries that don't have economic cooperation relations with us, we've tried to seek out their rivals. Today's international system is multipolar, and the unipolar order is on the decline. We've used this potential to build an economic chain with different*

countries. We have economic relations with China, Russia, Central Asia, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Arab countries, Middle Eastern countries, the Far East, and many others. There's no longer a system with one country in charge and we've used this understanding of the situation. This is why we have wide-ranging relations with many countries, even though we haven't been officially recognised.

Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs, Amir Khan Muttaqi presents his ministry's achievements in an accountability session in Kabul.
Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 21 August 2023

Similarly, on the last day of the sessions, acting Foreign Minister, Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, described Afghanistan as having an economy-oriented international policy aimed at having good relations with all countries and preventing Afghanistan from again becoming "a field of negative competition." In keeping with the general tone of the sessions, he presented a picture of progress:

We've been able to maintain good relations with all six of our neighbouring countries and keep the routes open. Afghan products, including agricultural, mineral and manufacturing, could reach distant countries.… Our relations

> *with countries in the region, whether the Arab countries or Central Asia, all the way to Russia, are good. Trade relationships have flourished and political relations have improved. There have also been contacts and meetings with European countries and the United States from time to time. We've sat together, heard each other's concerns and considered them. All in all, we're happy that, from America to Europe, from the Middle East to the Arab world, from Central Asia to the countries of the region and South Asia, all countries have reached a consensus that they will not support armed opposition in Afghanistan. It is good news for Afghans that they [the Afghans] can solve their problems at home and work together to rebuild their country.*

There was some mention in passing of difficulties in the international banking sector, but the main tenor was that problems had either been, or were being, solved. Shafi Azam, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' head of economic relations, said:

> *I want to admit that this year was full of difficult challenges, especially considering the country's economic and banking restrictions and the fact that business development and engagement with the world usually occur through banking interactions.… Fortunately, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the diplomatic apparatus of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan successfully overcame these challenges.*

The presentations provided little detail on international banking, the difficulties caused by sanctions or their supposed solutions. There was, however, some information in response to a question about problems with passports and money transfers encountered by traders that was put to the General Director of Industrial Parks from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry:

> *The commission, formed on the Supreme Leader's instruction and chaired by [Prime Minister] Hanafi saheb, decided that the ministries of Commerce and Industry and Foreign Affairs should cooperate on the [issue of] visas for traders. Passports are provided to traders who have a license within one day. The visa issue with China has been solved, as with Iran and Pakistan.… We have no restrictions on transferring money. Last month, we had a meeting with the banks. Some banks have a more idiosyncratic approach, but we don't have any kind of banking restrictions with the world, and all our banks are on the world's whitelist. We did have a problem with TT [telegraphic transfer], prices and transactions, but it [the price] has now decreased.*

It will be interesting to see what the tenor of this year's sessions will be and what details will be given, particularly concerning sanctions and banking restrictions, since many of them have not yet been solved.

AN ISLAMIC SYSTEM, RIGHTING THE WRONGS OF THE PAST

Whereas many of the presentations were largely practical, several also provided greater insight into how the Emirate views itself and its place in the world. The ministry that did this most clearly, embodying the difference between the Islamic Emirate and the Islamic Republic, was the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue, Prevention of Vice and Hearing of Complaints.[6] The way the Ministry of Virtue and Vice sees its position within the government and the wider world was described by its deputy minister for military affairs:

> *If we look at the philosophy of human creation, it clearly shows that man was sent on a mission to this earth for the caliphate.… An Islamic system is necessary for the survival of the world and God Almighty has given such an Islamic system to the Muslims of Afghanistan. Therefore, the leadership of this system found it necessary to establish the Ministry of Virtue and Vice in order to fulfil their responsibility.*

The ministry's presentation provided an overview of the religious framework, the focus and the practical structure of the ministry, which was based on the Islamic concept of the rights of God and the rights of man – as explained by the ministry's spokesman:

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[6] A state institution to promote virtue and prevent vice was first set up early in the twentieth century, when a Directorate of *Ihtisab* (Islamic accountability), also known as Amr bil-Maruf, was established by King Nader Khan in 1929 and formalised in 1930. During the reign of his son, Zaher Shah, the directorate, then made up of 20 ulema, worked within the framework of the Supreme Court. The first Islamic Republic, set up after the fall of the communist regime in 1992 and headed by Burhanuddin Rabbani, did have a vice and virtue ministry, as did the first Emirate.

In 2001, with the demise of the first Emirate, Amr bil-Maruf did not entirely disappear. It lost its ministerial status but lived on as a relatively powerless directorate under the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs. For more detail, see this 2022 AAN report: '[Policing Public Morality: Debates on promoting virtue and preventing vice in the Taleban's second Emirate]' by Sabawoon Samim.

> *Before sharing the ministry's one-year achievements with you, I must remind you that an Islamic system is said to be Islamic when there is promotion of virtue and prevention of vice. Praise God, the current sharia system has such a major mechanism. It is a matter of pride that in the current system, in the Ministry of Virtue and Vice and Hearing of Complaints, there are two areas that the people are obliged to comply with in a humane society: God's rights [haq ullah] and the people's rights [huquq ul-ebad]. In the administration of this ministry, the first part is the promotion of virtue and prevention of vice, which operates in the civilian and military sectors. This part oversees reformation of the system and is related to God's rights. The second part is the hearing of complaints. In this section, the loss of people's rights is prevented and people's complaints are dealt with.*

The responsibilities of the ministry, he said, are thus divided into three sections:

> *The first part is civilian; this is the promotion of virtue and prevention of vice among civilians. The second part is promoting virtue and preventing vice in government offices. The third part is hearing and addressing complaints, whether in the civilian or military field.*

A key department in the pursuit of preventing vice and ensuring virtue among civilians is the ministry's Directorate of Reform and Training of the Mohtasebin. The *mohtasebin* are often referred to as Virtue and Vice ombudsmen, although, in this context, enforcers would be a better translation.[7] This directorate falls under the Deputy Minister for Policy and has fielded enforcers across the country:

> *In order to interpret and implement its decrees, we have appointed mohtasebin in the capital, districts and provinces to promote virtue and prevent vice according to Islamic rules.… The mohtasebin are the real representatives of the Islamic Emirate in the country and their duty is to implement the Emirate leadership's orders in society. … In order to reform the civilian part of society, during the past year, the Ministry's mohtasebin visited 115,643 mosques and 36,478 universities, schools, health centres, sports venues, markets, parks, transportation routes, hotels and restaurants.*

[7] A *mohtaseb* (mohtasebin in plural) is an official appointed to promote virtue and prevent vice and ensure public behaviour is in accordance with sharia. The word is rooted in the doctrine of *hisbah* (from a root that has to do with accountability, or holding to account), which is an obligation for every Muslim – to enjoin good and thwart evil. For a detailed discussion, see 'The Oxford Handbook of Islamic law' here.

> *During those visits, they advised people to observe the hijab, conduct their appearance and behaviour according to sharia and refrain from listening to music, and told female travellers to follow the rules of Islam, such as wearing hijab and having a mahram while travelling. They asked drivers to refrain from transporting more women than the permissible limit without a mahram, to stop at the nearest mosque when prayer time arrives and to pray in congregation. They asked the people to cooperate with them in prohibiting evils and superstition in society.*

Mohtasebin, he said, had explained the necessity and virtue of marriage, monitored the collection of *ushr* [agricultural tithes collected by the Ministry of Agriculture on the harvest and sent to the office of the Amir] and instructed pharmacies and clinics to refrain from the sale of low-quality medicine, gold sellers not to sell substandard gold, and money exchangers not to keep parallel ledgers (a booklet or *seta* which can be used to make illegal profits). They had also identified "more than one hundred" sorcerers and amulet writers and introduced them to the court and destroyed alcohol factories. It is clear that the mohtasebin's reach into people's private and professional lives is considerable.

In reply to a journalist's question on the number of mohtasebin, the ministry's military deputy, Sheikh Shahidkhel, only said that the new ministry had been given a total *tashkil* [authorised workforce] of 7,000 staff nationwide. He added that the ministry's task was "more sacred and important than that of other ministries because its task is public reform."

Regarding the military section of the Ministry of Virtue and Vice, the spokesperson explained:

> *Over the past year, 40,288 civilian and military government departments have been monitored. The military deputy office was established to reform the military departments, ministries, security headquarters and army corps. All the army corps, military training centres, military facilities and all the districts of the country have been visited. The soldiers have been seriously requested to obey the Amir and his orders. Every month in Kabul, a three-person delegation from the ministry is sent to government offices and military bases to establish good governance in accordance with sharia.*

He also described some of the practical interventions that had been made as a result of these visits:

> *570 mujahedin, who were too young, were removed from military units and introduced to madrasas to finish their studies because of the order of the Supreme Leader. In most military centres, no one has long hair, since the leader issued a decree that mujahedin should not have hair that falls to their shoulders. Those who were accused of harassing the public have also been introduced to the military court. We deal with our military very seriously because the reform of the system leads to the reform of the general public. And we use gentleness and forgiveness with the general public. Most of the time, we give them advice.*

The basis for the third section of the virtue and vice ministry, the hearing and addressing of complaints, was described as follows:

> *As you are aware, the Supreme Leader has established a special deputy to address people's complaints. No one will be allowed to abuse the name of the Islamic Emirate or the name of mujahed and violate the rights of the ordinary people. In this deputy's office, all the people's complaints will be dealt with, whether they're from men or women.… There are three types of complaints: (1) Complaints from the general public against [other] members of the public, which are the responsibility of the Supreme Court. (2) Complaints of the general public against officials of the Islamic Emirate, which are the responsibility of the Ministry of Virtue and Vice. (3) Complaints from Emirate employees against [other] Emirate officials, which are the responsibility of the military court.*

While the Ministry of Virtue and Vice deals with complaints from the public against Emirate officials, it is interesting that the military court deals with cases between staff and/or officials of the Emirate. This seems to point to the ongoing influence of the military origins of the administration, with seemingly the whole of government within the purview of the military courts.[8]

The virtue and vice ministry spokesperson reported that, at the time of the session, 10,875 complaints had been sent to the complaints department through official

[8] Similarly, the administration still refers to those who were in the movement as 'mujahedin', regardless of what they now do. According to the Chief Justice Abdul Hakim Haqqani in his foundational book, '*Al-Emarat al-Islamiya wa Nidhamuha'* (The Islamic Emirate and its System of Governance), the Emirate's raison d'être is to fight an ongoing jihad to establish a full Islamic system, a "government of guidance." See AAN's 2023 report, 'A Taleban Theory of State: A review of the Chief Justice's book of jurisprudence' by John Butt, especially pages 13-18.

letters, 7,915 of which had been "completely resolved." Another 1,669 had been sent to the Department of Analysis and Evaluation and 605 to other relevant authorities. According to the explanation above, the complaints that were dealt with by the ministry would have been complaints from the general public about Emirate officials.

An important department in the ministry, which does not fall under any of the three deputies, is the General Directorate of *Dawat wa Ershad* (Invitation to Islam and Guidance) and is spread throughout government.[9] As was explained during the session:

> *The cabinet of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan approved the establishment of the Dawat wa Ershad directorate within the structure of this ministry. The Ministry of Virtue and Vice prepared the tashkil of the directorate and a Dawa wa Ershad department has been established in every administration of the Emirate.*

Several ministries did indeed mention the presence of a Dawat and Ershad department, which is responsible for the proper conduct of their employees in their administration. For instance, the Ministry of Justice reported:

> *The Department of Invitation and Guidance, which operates within the framework of this ministry, invites employees to carry out divine decrees, encourages them to dress and behave according to Islamic sharia, restricts music listening and encourages them to grow beards. Staff members are instructed, mentored and invited to perform prayers in congregation. The department occasionally organises special programmes to reform the workforce.*

Other ministries and bodies also mentioned how their work contributed to improving the social and religious mores of staff or the population or was framed by the need to strengthen the Islamic system. The Ministry of Information and Culture, for example, introduced its Trust and Economy Project, involving a countrywide network of councils that aimed to "reform the thinking of the youth." The plan, as introduced by Mawlawi Muhammad Yonus Rashed, acting Deputy Minister for Youth, involved the selection and training of 800 young leaders, one for each rural district and urban police district (presumably all male); an integration programme with 800 youth associations, each with eight working committees; a youth reform programme centring around mosques and focusing on "thought, belief and cultural reform";

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[9] See also the Ministry of Virtue and Vice's organogram on its website here.

The Dawat wa Ershad department was an important part of the insurgency as it sought to bring over Afghans, especially those in the ranks of the Republic's armed forces, to the Taleban.

and a national youth development programme which would seek to provide jobs, including through a national freelancing programme.[10]

Like several others, Mawlawi Amir Jan Saqib, deputy chair of the Academy of Sciences, reported not only practical achievements and responsibilities but also spiritual and religious ones, saying:

> *We're happy to be here and answer the nation's questions. Anyone who's not a thief is not afraid of accountability.… The Academy of Sciences is the highest research authority in the country. All over the world, the Academies of Sciences have a key role.… In Afghanistan, the spiritual growth of Afghanistan's Academy of Sciences is much higher than its outward growth. There are other administrations, such as the Ministry of Agriculture, which provides seeds to farmers and gives them gardens and grows trees, or the municipality which builds roads, and the Ministry of Public Works which also builds roads. But the Academy of Sciences improves spirituality.*

Similarly, four of the seven main achievements of the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), put forward by the acting Deputy Minister for Finance and Administration, were related to the Islamisation of the higher education sector. These included the convening of joint seminars to eliminate the gap between religious and contemporary subjects, the establishment of religious universities in six zones, the introduction of professors to all state and private universities to teach Islamic culture *(saqafat-e Islami)* and the introduction of more than 100 ulema to Kabul University to provide religious education seminars (see also this AAN report on universities under the Emirate).

The acting Deputy for Scientific Affairs explained how the Ministry of Higher Education had also sought to bring private religious education institutes under its control:

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[10] When asked, acting Deputy Minister for Youth Affairs clarified that the councils were not intended to be political. In response to a question about the make-up of the youth councils that had apparently already been established in Kabul ("Do they consist of young people and different ethnic groups? Do you propose them or do the people themselves introduce their representatives?"), he replied:

The procedure for the councils is not yet finalised, we are working on it. Everything will be clear in the procedure – how they are chosen and how they should operate. One thing I should mention is that these councils will be completely neutral and social. They won't have any kind of political activity. They're being created for the youth's cohesion in education and work, so that they can coordinate and be in touch. And through the councils, we want to be in touch with the youth so that we can support them in different areas.

> *We've brought those madrasas that had been arbitrarily established within the ministry's framework so that they're standardised and under its control. Those who specialise in religious subjects should be under the control of the Ministry of Higher Education so that they're equal to international standards.*

Students attend a graduation ceremony at a madrasa in Kandahar.
Photo: Sanaullah Seiam/AFP, 12 February 2023

The Ministry of Information and Culture reported that its Directorate for Media Supervision had evaluated and issued licences to 222 news agencies and social channels. Acting Minister Mullah Khairullah Khairkhwah told the gathered media why this was important:

> *As you are aware, in the past, local media published against the interests of the country and against sharia law. After the arrival of the Islamic Emirate, we could stop such publications because they had no benefit other than destroying our culture, promoting foreign culture and fuelling bigotry.*

The Ministry of Telecommunication and Information Technology, an explicitly technical ministry, also prefaced its extensive discussion of the various communication and IT systems with a nod to its Islamic credentials:

> *First, Praise God, we're Muslims and after many years, this land has been blessed with a system of Islamic government, which gives more importance to Afghan and Islamic values than to worldly values. The Ministry of Telecommunications has tried to shut down immoral websites in our country in compliance with Amir al-Mu'minin's order and in cooperation with ATRA [the Afghanistan Telecom Regulatory Authority]. Over the past 20 years, this had gone unchecked and led society towards immorality.*

Qari Fasihuddin Fetrat, the Army Chief of Staff, described the strategic duties and roles of the Ministry of Defence as including, first of all:

> *Glorifying or edifying 'kalam-e Allah' [the word of God, the Quran], defending the integrity of Islam, safeguarding Islamic and national values, safeguarding territorial integrity and independence, providing security, supporting law enforcement, observing or respecting human rights in the framework of sharia and supporting reconstruction and the national development projects.*

Similarly, the Defence Ministry spokesperson listed the ideological and cultural achievements of the ministry:

> *Promoting extraordinary lessons about obedience, order and discipline, sanitation and cleanliness and the implementation of the decrees of Amir al-Mu'minin; extraordinary lessons about the 10th of Muharram, Ashura, and the protection of Bait ul-Mal [the treasury]; competitions on the Prophet's biography among the units; establishing 50 religious schools at the level of the army corps and in the brigades of the National Islamic Army; supplying and distributing religious books and brochures to the religious schools and central units; promoting ideological and cultural lessons to officers, lieutenants and soldiers two days a week in all units of the Islamic army.*

CRITICISING THE REPUBLIC AND MANAGING THE TRANSITION

Several speakers took the opportunity to sharply criticise both the preceding regime and the role of the foreign "invaders," while hinting that (almost) all the problems they caused had now been solved. Mawlawi Ehsanullah Wasiq, Secretary

of the Commission for the Prevention of Land-Grabbing, for instance, began his presentation with the following take-down:

> *When invaders invade a country, they have different kinds of goals. One of the goals is to cultivate the seeds of disunity, discord and hypocrisy, because they want to reap those seeds even after they've left. In the past 20 years, the European and American invaders also worked on this. They created a mafia here, brought them to work in high government positions and supported them financially. They provided them with both wealth and power [zar wa zur]. The usurpers did not disobey and carried out all the duties the Westerners gave them. They grabbed government lands, pastures, picnic places, even green areas. They used those lands to construct buildings, townships and factories for their own interests. They didn't leave any place for the people's pastimes and transferred the money and revenue they collected abroad and started big businesses there. After the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan took over the whole of Afghanistan, one of its first tasks was to return those usurped lands.*

He added:

> *The previous administration planned New Kabul [Kabul-e Jadid, a new city to be built to the north of the capital] and wanted to inaugurate and start the work, but they couldn't, despite all their efforts, because the usurpers of land wouldn't let them unless they were given a share. Last Ramadan, our commission tasked a technical commission to start the work of Kabul-e Jadid. They worked hard for three or four months and in the coming days, you will witness the project's inauguration. All the obstacles have been removed. Some companies have transferred their equipment to the Deh Sabz township and are ready to start. All our people know this is a vital project, not only for Kabul but for the whole of Afghanistan; thousands will be employed, traffic will decrease and the township will be based on modern systems. The commission did in four months what the previous government couldn't do in years.*

The National Environmental Protection Agency spoke about the harm done previously to the country's forests:

> *You know that forests play the most important role in decreasing harmful gases. But our forests were affected by the invaders and the people damaged them a lot too. Now, the forests are safe all over the country and nobody cuts them down, which is a big achievement.*

The Academy of Sciences spoke about the intellectual influence of outsiders:

> *Afghanistan is a war-torn country which has just emerged from conflict. During the past several years, its culture and academics were influenced by the invaders. However, these publications you see are all from the Academy of Sciences. It's the work of doctors and university professors. If anyone has doubts, especially the media, we can give them some of these books and they can see for themselves.*

The Technical and Vocational Education Training Authority spoke about the well-known problem of ghost employees under the Republic:

> *During the past year, we checked and assessed our offices. Most sections were ghost offices during the previous government. There were no staff, but salaries were paid and someone as the head of that office was getting the salaries of the ghost staff. When the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan came to power, we found out about the ghost offices and got rid of them. We activated offices that were inactive and that the people really needed. For instance, in some provinces, where needed, we upgraded schools to institutes.*

A key instrument in the efforts to consolidate an Islamic system and root out the influences of the last 20 years has been the sweeping review of all laws and regulations, ordered by the Supreme Leader, to ensure they are according to the Emirate's understanding of sharia. The key ministry in this endeavour is the Ministry of Justice. Although under the Republic the Justice Ministry was also tasked with ensuring that legislation complied with both the constitution and Hanafi jurisprudence, the emphasis under the Emirate is much more squarely on ensuring that laws and rules are directly rooted in religious principles, as part of the push to Islamise the system of government.

Almost all ministries and government bodies reported that they had evaluated their regulations, revised the law underlying their work and passed the law on to the Ministry of Justice for review. At the time, the Justice Ministry said it had reviewed and revised 49 legislative drafts and ten procedures. It had provided 259 pieces of legal advice, 35 of which related to international treaties and memoranda of understanding (MoUs). Since then, at least seven ministerial laws have been reported as having been approved by the Supreme Leader, while another 160 laws were finalised by the Ministry of Justice and sent on for ratification and approval (see, for instance, this ToloNews report from 12 April 2024).

Acting Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani cuts a ribbon during the inauguration of the second phase of the Qosh Tepa Canal in Hairatan, Balkh Province.
Photo: Atif Aryan/AFP, 11 October 2023

The justice ministry's General Director of the Institute of Legislative Affairs described the review process as follows:[11]

> *This is a mujahed nation. Whenever our country was invaded, our nation stood with the mujahedin against the occupation. The main goal was to achieve a sharia system and now that a sharia system governs the country, it requires laws that are entirely sharia compliant. [To do so] we have cited passages from the Qur'an, hadiths, and jurisprudence books for each article of the laws that we have discussed.… The Amir al-Mu'minin issued decree number 9 for the procedures to ratify and repeal laws. First, the law is carefully reviewed and then drafted by jurists, sheikhs, scholars, and professionals from the relevant ministries and institutions. Then, it is sent to the Ministry of Justice, where we have around 15 committees, including language review committees for*

[11] For the text of decree number 9 that defines the stages that legislative documents must pass through, see page 67 of AAN's unofficial translation of the decrees, orders and instructions of the Emirate's Supreme Leader and see our report, 'From Land-grabbing to Haircuts', for a more general discussion of the Emirate's edicts.

> *both Dari and Pashto and editorial committees to edit the drafts. We have 25 great scholars, including sheikhs, muftis and jurists, who review all provisions before adding them to the law. After that, the Committee for the Revision and Confirmation of Legislative Documents, which is headed by the Chief Justice, reviews the law and then sends it to the Amir al-Mu'minin, who examines each law in cooperation with a special council. Every article is read in front of the Amir and discussed and after confirmation, the Amir ratifies the law.*

When asked what the shortcomings in the constitution and laws of the previous government had been, the minister replied:

> *Ours is a sharia system. Each article must be attributed to a verse in the Quran, hadith or the Hanafi fiqh [jurisprudence of the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam]. No one can show me that the articles of the former constitution were attributed to the book of God, hadith or Hanafi fiqh. Fortunately, the current laws, when they're established, will be published with attribution, so no one can wonder whether a law or article might be against Islamic sharia or not.*

Another issue in the transition between the two governments has been staffing; it is clear that a large portion of the former staff of most ministries has been retained. In some cases, this was put forward as a sign of inclusion, although the numbers may be exaggerated. For instance, when asked how many Republic-era judges were still with the ministry and how many had left, head of legislative affairs Mufti Fazl Hadi Sahebzada said:

> *You can see in all the ministries that only the leading posts, such as ministers, deputies and some heads of departments, are occupied by friends of the Islamic Emirate. In the other posts, in the middle, all are former government employees, while the mujahedin are in the low-ranking posts. Just as we respect our mujahedin employees, they [the former employees] are also considered employees of the Emirate and are respected. In the Ministry of Justice, the majority of former law professionals are still working with us. Some are heads of a department, like [he mentions three names]. 95 per cent of the former employees are [still] present in the Ministry of Justice.*[12]

[12] In AAN research in 2023 on how the Emirate spends domestic revenues, however, former judges and prosecutors reported that all female Republic-era judges had been dismissed by the Emirate as well as almost all male judges. See 'What Do The Taleban Spend Afghanistan's Money On? Government expenditure under the Islamic Emirate', p36-37. Elsewhere, outside the armed forces and intelligence, it seemed that most civil servants had been kept on, although almost all female employees had been sent home.

The other side of the coin has been the incorporation of former Taleban fighters into the government. Several ministries had been actively involved in integrating and training former Taleban fighters, in religious or other subjects. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, for instance, reported that it had conducted a public awareness and capacity-building programme for "1,532 newly appointed employees, especially mujahedin," in 15 provinces of the country.

The Ershad department of the Ministry of Justice reported it had started a madrasa, presumably for its own employees:

> *Last year, a school was established in the Ministry of Justice called the Justice Madrasa, where mujahedin and those deprived of education during the jihad are educated through long and short [religious] courses. Eighteen Taleban have completed the long course (loya dawra) and graduated last year. We also had Taleban who've graduated from the short course (wara dawra) and [the programme] will continue this year. The ministry's leadership is paying serious attention to this so that those who study religious subjects will have the correct religious education.*

The Technical and Vocational Training Authority (TVET) had worked on a plan to enhance administrative skills:

> *It's only natural that the mujahedin who waged jihad against America for 20 years and came to [work in] offices after the victory don't have a proper knowledge of administrative work. So, we made a plan with the professional teachers of this department and presented it to the cabinet. The programme includes [training in] administration, management, English, computers, writing and spelling. The cabinet approved it and we sent it to the Ministry of Justice for some legal matters. When it comes back, we'll implement it in 34 provinces so that all mujahedin can be trained for practical and professional administrative work.*

The Ministry of Higher Education reported that it had established six more religious universities in addition to the ones in Kabul and Kandahar (for background see this AAN report). Since then, it has accelerated the awarding of religious studies degrees within the Emirate's ranks (see for instance, this report announcing the examination of 51,000 ulema in March 2024).[13] Such qualifications have implications for salaries

[13] Over the last year, the Ministry of Higher Education has accelerated the examination and awarding of religious studies qualifications, equivalent to and named as secondary school diplomas, bachelor's, master's and PhDs, to those within the ranks of the 'mujahedin'.

and grades within the civil service and armed forces, so the move may not entirely be driven by education per se.

The Ministry of National Defence reported on the (re)registration and streamlining of the defence forces, which had involved the inclusion of 170,000 Taleban fighters (mujahedin) into the ministry's ranks:

> *We reviewed the ministry's tashkil and revised its duties, prepared, edited and distributed the registration form for the inclusion of employees into the ranks of the National Islamic Army. As a result, 170,000 mujahedin were registered in all units of the Ministry of National Defence and this process has been completed.*

These 170,000 included "214 mujahedin who were appointed or reappointed in high-ranking posts such as generals and 35 who were reappointed in acting [positions]," as well as "166,317 mujahedin, officers, generals, lieutenants and soldiers and 4,081 civil servants and service employees who were appointed or reappointed."

Some of those who had sought to be in the army have since been removed from the ranks by the *Tasfieh* [purification or purging] Commission:

> *35,587 people who did not have a background in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan ranks or who were not professionals were removed from registration after a review by the Commission for the Purification of the Ranks.… 649 officers and lieutenants were retired, while the service of 202 professional specialist officers and lieutenants of the former military was extended. The qualifying ranks of new and former military students from 49 educational institutions were fixed.*

Discussions on what to do with former US military bases, particularly Bagram airbase, were still ongoing, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry reported:

> *The Economic Commission decided that the military bases that are not useful for the Ministry of Defence should be transformed into economic zones. The cabinet also approved this. A committee was formed, made up of the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defence, GDI and Ministry of Commerce and Industry. The work is ongoing on [deciding] whether it's better to transform the American bases into Special Economic Zones or to allocate other places for such zones. Both options are open to us because special economic zones are part of our economic progress. First, we're working on the electricity plan, because electricity from generators is very expensive, which means we can't compete with neighbouring*

> *countries. We'll try to effectively use the places that the Ministry of Defence isn't using and that have facilities, such as airport runways.*

Other officials gave other examples of ways in which the Emirate is dealing with the transition. The Prison Authority said it had established a department to evaluate the cases of those imprisoned during the Republic and had subsequently released two batches of 7,000 and 5,000 prisoners. The Ministry of Transport and Aviation said it was working with international companies to "advance and improve" the country's airfields and repair the damage foreign forces had inflicted when they left.

THE NATURE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Several officials described the Emirate's accountability sessions as being utterly unlike the Republic's. Acting Deputy Virtue and Vice Minister (Military Affairs), Shahidkhel, stressed the fact that the Emirate was no longer beholden to foreigners:[14]

> *Thank God, today, we are sitting in front of you. Two years ago, the occupiers were sitting here for the same programme, but that programme was not for the nation. It was for the American mercenaries and their slaves, who were appointed against their own nation and who valued America's interests above those of their own country. They were accountable to the Americans, telling them how much they'd implemented the Americans' objectives in Afghanistan and how they'd spent the money the Americans paid to use against their nation. They called it accountability to the nation, but it was accountability to the occupiers.*

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[14] Afghan daily Hasht-e Subh, which is based outside Afghanistan, disagreed with this view. In an editorial titled "Who is the Taliban accountable to?" it wrote:

The intended audience for the Taliban report is not the Afghan people, but rather other sources. The Taliban must adopt certain roles in order to maintain their power and attract support from foreigners. The "Government to Nation Accountability Programme" is also part of this strategy. Over the past two years, they have consistently stated that they do not believe in the conventional concepts of the state and the nation. They do not view the relationship between the Afghan people and the "Talib Emirate" as a mutual relationship between the nation and the state. Instead, they seek to establish an emirate where the people are referred to as subjects and are obligated to obey. In such a system, where obedience to the emirate is paramount, reporting holds no significance. When the existence of the nation's role within the system is not tolerated, the constitution and other laws are abolished, resulting in the absence of both a nation and a government.

> *Thank God, those giving account and those receiving it are now equal. Both we and our nation serve our country and Islam.*

He then described a tiered accountability system that involved the nation, one's own conscience and ultimately, God, on the Day of Judgement:

> *It's a source of pride that we're accountable to our nation because all the officials of the Islamic Emirate are Islamic scholars [ulema] and are honest in serving the country. They were the ones who made sacrifices for twenty years against the occupiers to make the homeland free and independent and to make the nation the possessor of an Islamic system. In addition to giving an account to the nation, the leaders of the Islamic Emirate always answer to themselves and to God when they're alone, because they consider themselves responsible for this society. In fact, they don't want to show off and tell the media what they've done.*
>
> *In the past, [the government] didn't share the facts with the people in the accountability programme. According to our information, they were selling positions in the offices. They didn't share anything without receiving money; nobody was appointed without an intermediary or paying a bribe. They didn't consider professionalism or merits. At that time, they were cheating the people, but now, thank God, we share the realities of what we have done with the nation without external pressure. First, we are accountable to ourselves, our conscience, and then to God. On the Day of Judgment, Almighty God will notice our actions. We're accountable to him.*

Although accountability to the nation was continuously stressed, it was also clear there was no direct mechanism but rather a blanket assurance that the nation's interests were being taken into account by religious scholars who, it should be assumed, would behave honestly.

In cases where international norms and regulations were mentioned, this was usually related to concrete technical or bureaucratic specifications, which were in all cases subordinate to the Emirate's interpretation of sharia. See for instance the introduction by the General Director of the Supreme Audit Office, Mawlawi Muhammad Muhsin Hashemi:

> *The Islamic system, which appeared as the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan, shows that Islam, sharia principles, God's orders and His messenger's guidance are our doctrine and law. Achieving those are our main goals.… We, as the*

> *leaders of the social system of Afghanistan, try to do everything according to Islam, starting from the Amir al-Mu'minin to the most junior head or staff member. The Supreme Audit Office is the country's main investigative agency. We conduct different types of audits in a neutral, independent and responsible way, taking into account the decrees and orders of the Amir al-Mu'minin and the standards of the International Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions [INTOSAI]. We do compliance audits, inspection of the government's final accounts, performance audits, IT system audits, public building project audits and special audits in public sector agencies and submit the final reports to the Office of the Supreme Leader of the IEA. The outlook of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is that our agencies should be made into role models for transparency, accountability and anti-corruption among the countries of the region and the world.*

The practical upsides of the accountability sessions were phrased in much the same terms as the Republic had done: greater transparency is aimed at fostering trust, while the exercise of reporting is aimed at helping departments improve their performance, as described by Minister of Justice Sharaee:

> *First of all, accountability is a good deed and has a sharia origin.… Second, accountability between the government and the nation fosters trust. Third, accountability is a standard by which each department can be measured to see how much good work it has accomplished, how effective it has been in its endeavours and how many failures it has suffered that need to be corrected in the future.*

As discussed earlier, the media is not seen as an instrument of accountability and critical reporting by journalists is clearly not considered part of the media's role. Any constructive criticism, acting Deputy Minister for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice Shahidkhel explained, was to be brought to the government's attention rather than being reported and thereby playing into the propaganda efforts of a hostile outside world. He gave these instructions to the media:

> *Support the Islamic Emirate and consider the national interests. Don't accept what the Westerners say. Don't serve them. Don't believe their lies. Introduce Afghanistan properly to the world and bring the facts to the world. There is freedom of speech, but freedom of speech doesn't mean working for the interests of other countries, spreading propaganda against your country and government*

> *and saying whatever they want you to say. If you see shortcomings in the officials of the Islamic Emirate, bring it to the attention of the officials. Sound criticism is the right of all the country's citizens, [but] we have to fight against the enemy's propaganda. At the moment, the struggles, whether propaganda, scientific, political or economic, are ongoing and we must stand against them.*

There also appear to be no specific mechanisms for citizens to seek to influence or shape policy, provide feedback or express criticism, grievances or dissent with regard to the system and its actions. There are the complaints mechanisms provided by the Ministry of Virtue and Vice, where citizens can complain about individual officials or actions taken against them; people can seek to have a private meeting with an Emirate official or someone who might speak on their behalf to officials; they can present a petition to an official or ministry or take part in a general consultative meeting. (In regards to the latter, for example, acting Minister of Tribal and Border Affairs, Mawlawi Nuri Nurullah, described the role of his ministry as "a cohesive bridge between the IEA and the nation. This ministry has close relations with all the tribes of the country. It convenes jirgas and meetings, hears the problem of tribes and tries to find the solution through different institutions and departments.")

Otherwise, it seems, citizens simply need to accept the information they are given and trust that the Emirate will control its forces and monitor its employees, uphold rights and laws, collect and spend revenues fairly and generally act in the interests of the country's citizens.

DIGITALISATION, MAPPING AND CONTROL

A noticeable theme in many of the sessions was the reported progress in the fields of digitisation, database creation and e-governance. This was often described as a means of increasing transparency, through for instance a closer tracking of revenues, permit allocations or staff attendance, as, for example, reported by the Kabul Municipality:

> *We created an HRMIS [Human Resource Management Information System], which specifically registers all records and backgrounds of people working in*

> *the Kabul municipality. We developed specific FMIS [Financial Management Information Systems] for trade licenses, the signboard and billboard section and urban services section, an electronic attendance system, a shared drive system, the registration of building violations and of tender announcements, the registration of government property, which is very important, and many other systems. We were also able to connect the Kabul Municipality's permit section with the TIN (Tax ID Number) system of the Ministry of Finance. In the past, a person could get a license with their TIN and if they had [tax] debts, they could evade taxes by getting a new license under another name. Now, all this information is connected and, if they get a license with the same TIN, the outstanding debt will be calculated.*

In other cases, digitisation efforts were reported to increase the accessibility of archives and databases, such as the Academy of Sciences library. Institutes with a monitoring or registration mandate paid special attention to the topic. These included the Food and Drug Control Agency, which reported:

> *We think about how the rest of the world controls these systems and how we can bring transparency and do a month's work in a day.… For this reason, we try to digitise and computerise the office system so that we can control all systems through databases, software and applications and end bureaucracy. Most people who have mobile phones and access to the internet can use apps. We can use the database to start online monitoring. Take, for example, a pharmacy in Shughnan district of Badakhshan. If our team goes there, it will waste a lot of time, so we're working to create a database for all drug facilities. They must install it and register all purchases and all materials being stored.… We'll be able to check from the centre how much medicine a pharmacy bought or sold today, the medicine's date of expiry, from which company it was bought, whether that company was registered and whether it has quality control documents. The computerisation or digitisation of health will guarantee transparency across the country. We'll be connected to the entire administration, from the administrative centre to the gate, the customs, even the foreign companies and then to the provinces, like a net. This will benefit us a lot. Transparency will come, bribery will go away, time will be saved.… The foreign companies that export medicines to Afghanistan will be controlled. No one will be allowed to smuggle. There will be a barcode system. In other words, this system is for the country's benefit and guarantees food and medicine safety, quality and transparency.*

The most comprehensive overview of the digitalisation effort was, unsurprisingly, provided by the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication, which reported work on 39 digital governance systems, 23 of which had been completed, and requests for an additional 20 new systems.[15]

People gather around an excavator during the inauguration of the second phase of the Qosh Tepa Canal in Hairatan, Balkh Province.
Photo: Atif Aryan/AFP, 11 October 2023

In practice, governance continues to be a mix of old and new systems, as it had been before. The Ministry of Transport and Aviation, for instance, reported that:

> *We've given priority to the electronic system. In some areas, the system has already become electronic and work is ongoing to complete it.… In coordination with the Ministry of Finance and Da Afghanistan Bank, we worked*

[15] Examples of e-governance systems which the Ministry of IT and Telecommunication had completed included the statistical data registration for Afghan Post and Afghan Telecom, a frequency bidding system and SIM card management for ATRA, several inventory and warehouse management systems (including for legal documents at the Ministry of Justice, identity cards and weapons licenses and the inventory of NSIA), systems to establish the identity of Afghan nationals and scan electronic ID card forms; banking systems, electronic attendance systems and a land transportation management system for the Ministry of Aviation and Transport.

> *on the transparency and regularisation of revenue collection. For now, all revenues and incomes are collected via the Central Bank. Only in the land transportation sector, there are some limited resources that are collected by the provincial finance departments (mostofiat), using booklets with special sukuk [financial certificate] numbers, which are reported to the Ministry of Finance. We're trying to connect these places to the banking system too.*

Several institutions mentioned the increased use of security cameras, including the Ministry of Interior (CCTV cameras in Kabul city), Public Health (cameras in all diagnostic and tertiary hospitals) and the Railway Authority (cameras in all ports and provincial offices). Others reported the use of biometrics. The Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled explained their importance:

> *Last year, we moved from a computer data system to [using] biometric electronic data. We tried to improve and upgrade the computer systems in 18 provinces and make them biometric, as we all know how much transparency there is in biometrics. There are two benefits: first, the rights of the disabled, widows and the heirs of the martyrs will be protected, as they can be known and identified by biometrics wherever they are. The second benefit is for governance and the government, as there is no theft or embezzlement in a biometric system.… So far, a total of 77,699 orphans, widows and disabled people have been registered in the biometric system.*

Other ministries reporting the use of biometrics, included the National Examination Authority, the Ministry of Interior (registering criminal suspects), the National Statistics and Information Authority or NSIA (issuing ID cards) and the Prison Authority (in relation to the registration of child beggars).[16]

The National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA), the main body involved in data collection, reported that it was involved in preparing several surveys. These included a multi-cluster survey of mother and child health, with the assistance of UNICEF, and the ongoing mapping of (de)forestation, flood damage, wheat and

[16] The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs reported that the Committee for the Collecting of Beggars had gathered up 18,777 child beggars. 7,210 were introduced to the Red Crescent for inspection and identification; 11,496 were found to be "professional beggars" and 71 who had no guardian or parent were sent to orphanages. The Prison Authority said there were around 300 to 400 children begging in Kabul who had been collected by the IEA: "Their biometrics will be taken. The ones who are eligible will be provided with assistance and those who are ineligible will be sent to their homes and their parents will have to guarantee that they will not beg in the future."

rice cultivation and street and road networks, through satellite imagery and remote sensing technology. It also discussed several new surveys, including a countrywide mapping of villages:

> *The figures will be collected from all relevant departments, and analysed and published. We'll do a survey of villages and of lists of families. This will include the registration of all villages in the provinces, an accurate census of the villages and of social and economic indicators to update the geographical database of villages. There will also be surveys of mosques, health centres, schools and other government facilities. As a result of these surveys, we'll record accurate population figures, exact village names and exact geographic addresses and information in a special database so we can have our national census in this way.*

The General Director for Geographic Information added:

> *Also, based on the geographic information technology and satellite images of the past years that were used to count houses, a code was created for each house in the geographical system and its geographic location was specified.*[17]

This seems to tie in with reports on the ground that, at least in the cities, but possibly increasingly also in the villages, people cannot move into an area without being registered and vouched for by a combination of local leaders (*wakil-e gozars* or heads of neighbourhoods in the cities), people already living in the neighbourhood, real estate agents, and the General Directorate of Intelligence.

Another example of measures that provide opportunities for increased government control and surveillance is the obligatory registration of mobile phone SIM cards, as reported by the Ministry of Telecommunication and Information Technology:

> *We registered all SIM cards that had been sold on the open market during the Republic and prohibited their unrestricted sale. This is crucial for preventing corruption and lowering crime rates. Currently, SIM cards can only be purchased from official telecommunications company outlets under certain circumstances. All telecom networks are under [our] control and nobody's allowed to break the law. For this, we've set up a different system linked to*

[17] The NSIA's General Director for Geographic Information further said that there were around 6.3 to 6.5 million buildings, about 5.8 million of them residential, about 100,000 non-residential and around 400,000 not completed. He said the NSIA had also processed the formal documents for 39 districts in 19 provinces, most of them newly established, and for 108 new villages in 9 provinces.

> *the statistics centre so that when someone obtains a SIM card, the networks can verify the real and fake ID cards. Everyone who buys a SIM card must be accountable for it.*

RELATIONS WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD

A clear thread running through many of the presentations, alongside the primacy of the Islamic system and a focus on economic self-sufficiency, was a mixed and sometimes contradictory attitude towards the outside world. Some speakers railed against an outside, largely Western, world that they saw as a continued source of negative propaganda and corrupting influences. Others complained about the cessation of aid and described how they were trying to woo donors and get stalled projects restarted and funded again. There was also a clear streak of wanting good relations, especially economically, with the rest of the world, starting with the neighbours and region and fanning out from there, as acting Minister of Foreign Affairs Amir Khan Muttaqi summarised:

> *We hope the world will finally conclude that relations with Afghanistan should return to a normal level. In the past two years, our relations have been improving day by day. We sent new diplomats to many countries and relationships with the embassies that are open in Kabul are strengthened every day.… The policy of Afghanistan's current government is balanced and economy-oriented. We don't want our dear country ever again to become a field of negative competition between the great powers of the world. We want to have good relations with all, both economic and political, so that, from now on, Afghanistan can be secure and play a role in the region in the fields of transit, economy and trade.*

He reported that diplomatic offices were being directly managed from Kabul – in China, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan (the Khoruq consulate), Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Dubai and Malaysia – and their diplomats had been accepted by these host countries (except in the case of Tajikistan). Most of these countries also had embassies in Kabul (except two, who had a representative). Other countries, he said, had not yet received new

Afghan diplomats, but "the [current] staff is in contact with us and obey the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan."

When asked why none of these countries had officially recognised the IEA despite the good relations, acting Foreign Minister Muttaqi replied:

> *We're trying to find a definition for what 'recognition' means, but there has been none so far. As far as I know, recognition is when the embassy of a country is opened in your country and your embassy opens in that country. Your diplomats are active in their country and their diplomats are active in yours. You accept each other's visas and passports, trade continues normally and there are visiting delegations. If this is recognition, it exists. If recognition is something else, then someone should define it so I can answer the question.*

Many of the ministries and departments discussed concrete instances of international cooperation with multilateral institutions, other countries or international federations. Many of these comments were made in the context of large multilateral connectivity projects, such as TAPI, CASA-100 and the Trans-Afghan Railway. There was also talk of agreements and cooperation with and (indirect) support from international organisations and NGOs, which was notable given the amount of international handwringing over whether or not to engage with the Emirate in disbursing aid (see AAN reporting here). The state electricity company, Breshna Sherkat, for instance, said it had received considerable (in kind) aid from the International Committee of the Red Cross:[18]

> *Last year, we received 9.7 million dollars in aid from the Red Cross Committee. This year, we submitted our projects to them and fortunately, they're ready to help us with renewable energy, half-finished projects and other sectors where people are facing a lot of problems. We also presented them with a procurement package and I hope they'll buy it for us.… You know that in the past, the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, USAID, GIZ, and other donors helped Breshna with development projects and electricity provision in some areas. Unfortunately, there's been no help in the last two years and it seemed that Breshna would certainly collapse. But the company's engineers,*

[18] According to ICRC's 2023 operational facts and figures (see here), "Over a million people received improved electricity supply through the provision of 75,000 litres of fuel, 4 diesel generators, electrical equipment and transformers to Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS)." In 2022 it reported that it had "donated almost 4 million litres of fuel to the authorities; it also provided engine and transformer oil, transformers, chlorine, spare parts and other supplies essential for infrastructure maintenance."

> *employees and leadership were able not only to keep it moving forward but also to make fundamental progress.*

The earlier-cited NSIA survey on mother and child health had "cost 3 million US dollars and was carried out with financial and technical assistance of UNICEF." The Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development also described several projects, costing millions of afghanis and dollars, although the money was not directly paid into the ministry:

> *From the budget of the Asian Development Bank that was already deposited in the accounts of the village development councils, 18 projects were completed in Kandahar, for the restoration and cleaning of concrete canals and drains and retaining walls, at a cost of more than 79 million afghanis [worth around USD 900,000 at the time]. Work is also underway on 58 other projects worth 281 million afghanis [USD 3.2m] to repair and clean concrete canals and karezes.… We have thousands of MoUs with UNOPS [United Nations Office for Project Services], worth USD 150 million in 26 provinces and 68 districts, for roads and irrigation, of which 700 projects have been completed. And we have 384 projects worth 2.366 billion afghanis [USD 27.5m] with other organisations for retaining walls, canals, dams and earthen dams. With regard to WFP [World Food Programme] and other organisations that distribute food and give cash or food for work in the provinces, the provincial directorates of the ministry are fully cooperating with them to identify beneficiaries and help with other activities.*

The Technical and Vocational Education and Training Authority, while not providing figures, reported agreements and cooperation with various international organisations seeking to implement training programmes:

> *We have an agreement with the international organisation SDN/STN to meet the requirement of training technicians for industrial factories and an agreement with the international NGO, Beman Dar Afghanistan [Stay in Afghanistan], to transfer five technical fields of study from Germany to Afghanistan.… They have a three-year curriculum for such fields of study but would teach it in one year in Afghanistan.… This should solve the problem of industrial factories that rely on the skills of professional foreigners.*

The Kabul Municipality said it had several projects with "partner NGOs such as UNDP [UN Development Programme], that are funded by the World Bank,

Habitat and the Agha Khan Foundation and MoUs with other organisations," which had resulted in 210 projects for roads, parks and buildings (20 of which had been completed and 110 of which were in various stages of preparation, at the time).

The acting Deputy Minister for Youth Affairs at the Ministry for Information and Culture reported on international cooperation and funding in support of the freelancing section of its youth programme:[19]

> *In the freelance sector, we've signed a memorandum of understanding with international institutions. Currently, a large project has been launched in the northern provinces, which will be completed in three years at the cost of three million [dollars]. The NGO ACTED [Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development] has taken responsibility for these expenses and trains the youth in education and work.*

The Ministry of Public Health reported that (only) around ten per cent of health expenditure was covered by international donors and pointed to a renaming of projects, presumably to facilitate the international allocation of funds:

> *What's given to the people of Afghanistan in the form of donations is a very small part of our health spending. If we take all the foreign funds, it wouldn't cover even ten per cent of it. Therefore, their budget and our plans are not comparable.… There are different [kinds of] projects; we have healthcare projects that have been changed to Health Emergency Response Projects and in the past 18 months, 330 million dollars had been allocated to them. Some problems exist between us and them [the donors]. We try to get the donors to share their budget plans and budgetary breakdowns, [such as] how much [money] they have and where it's spent. We've tried to provide them with everything based on close cooperation and coordination.*

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[19] The acting Deputy Minister for Youth Affairs explained the particulars of the freelancing programme, saying: *Over the past year, freelancing centres have been established in Kabul, Mazar and Herat, for freelancing in the online world and providing job opportunities for young people. 260 young people have been trained in these centres and some talented students have actually found work projects. The income of these three centres is more than ten thousand US dollars. Considering the activities of the youth and the advancement of technology, we've agreed to create a plan to start this freelancing programme throughout the country to employ the youth, so they can show their ability and talent, find work for themselves and earn money for the government. At the moment, we plan to open centres in seven zones of the country. We will hold a three-month workshop in Kabul, which will cost 57,000 US dollars and will train more than 40 people. Then we'll activate freelancing centres in the zones.*

The National Department for Environmental Protection said it had received a commitment of USD 30 million from the Global Environment Facility (GEF). It had also followed up on 32 suspended environmental protection and climate change projects together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Two of those projects had been restarted: a USD 10 million project for the durable management of forests and pastures and a USD 6.6 million project for the prevention of land degradation.

Several independent institutions, in particular the highly technical or specialised ones, spoke of their relevant international memberships.[20] See, for instance, the Railway Authority, which reported:

> *In all the difficult situations the government is facing – most of our embassies in the world are not under our control and we have visa and travel challenges and difficulties with our flag at international meetings – still, we've managed to become a member of another council, a large and important regional council with its centre in Moscow that controls administrative railway affairs in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, including Russia, particularly the transfer of goods by train. Before that, we needed Uzbekistan to represent us, but now we can directly represent Afghanistan. Five or six months ago, we signed a contract with a Kazakh company, but we couldn't go ahead with it because we weren't a member of this council and Uzbekistan didn't allow direct transfers from Termez to Hairatan. Then we applied for membership and it was given to us.… This will make the calculation of wagons and their passage much easier.*[21]

Afghan Post, Afghanistan's state-owned national mail and courier organisation, reported several achievements in international connectivity, including reconnecting with the Universal Postal Union, the Asia Pacific Universal Union and all post offices

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[20] Examples of government bodies that continue to be active members of specialised international organisations included the following:

- The National Standards Authority is a member of the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC), the Standards and Metrology Institute for Islamic Countries (SMIIC), the South Asian Regional Standards Organisation (SARSO) and the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO).
- The Supreme Audit Office is a member of the International Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions (IOSAI) and the Asian Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions (AOSAI).
- The Railway Authority is a member of the International Union of Railways (UIC) and the Organisation for Railways Cooperation's (OSJD) Council of General Directors (CGD).

[21] This probably refers to the Conference of General Directors (CGD) of the Organisation for Cooperation Between Railways (OSJD). The current head of Afghanistan's Railway Authority is listed as a CGD member (see here).

of its member countries, restarting incoming international mail shipments and preparing the resumption of outgoing international mail through international transit offices in Doha, Dubai, Helsinki, Istanbul, Moscow and Zurich.

A freight train arrives from Uzbekistan on the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan Friendship Bridge in the border town of Hairatan, Balkh province.
Photo: Atif Aryan/AFP, 5 March 2024

The National Olympic Committee said it had faced some problems internationally since the IEA takeover:

> *It's true that since the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan came to power, our budget has been suspended. Not one cent has been sent to the National Olympic Committee's account. A key reason was that the authorities made a mistake when the IEA came to power. They meant to appoint Nazar Mutmain as General Director of Physical Training and Sports, but in the official letter, he was introduced as chairman of the National Olympic Committee, which is against the World Olympic Committee's [WOC] charter. The WOC criticised this in several meetings with us, online and in person. They also had other*

demands that we couldn't fulfil according to the charter. So, they imposed a lot of restrictions and were about to suspend the National Olympic Committee of Afghanistan officially. Fortunately … a new general director of physical training and sport was introduced and a major problem was solved.

Another major problem is salaries and money transfers to Afghanistan [salaries are paid by the WOC].[22] We're working on this and hope it will be solved in the near future. Fortunately, we no longer have problems regarding competitions. We weren't allowed to participate in the Asian Games and [other] competitions because we were suspended, but now we can participate. You witnessed Afghan teams participating in Asian competitions in China. Hopefully, more problems will be solved every day.

The National Department for Environmental Protection (NDEP) reported that some international funding bodies had cut connections since the Emirate took over. It made a plea for sustained outside support, given Afghanistan's climate change-induced crises, but also in the light of the global nature of environmental problems:

The environment doesn't have borders. It will be a blunder if the international community links environmental issues with politics. The National Department for Environmental Protection is committed to international agreements and we've maintained communication and coordination with the secretariats of 16 international conventions and protocols.… We [Afghanistan] contribute only 0.8 per cent to climate change through greenhouse gases, which is almost zero compared to other countries. We were affected twice because of two invasions. Our forests and animals were not safe from cluster bombs and the 'mother of bombs'[23] and other kinds of weapons, which have affected the climate. Based on human rights and the laws the West has made, we should be given compensation. Instead, they imposed cruel restrictions on our country.

Our department has also been affected by bans. The GCF [Green Climate Fund], the Journal for Environmental Management, and the Adaptation Fund have all cut ties with us, saying our government isn't officially recognised, even though the job of this department is to save the lives of animals and human beings. If

[22] Earlier the head of the National Olympic Committee had explained that it is "a member of the Asian and World Olympic Committee, which means [staff] don't get their salary from the government. Rather, the Asian and World Olympic Committee pays them."

[23] The 'Mother of all Bombs' was dropped by the United States military on an ISKP stronghold in Nangrahar province on 13 April 2017. See AAN reporting here.

they were committed to this, they wouldn't have linked such a vital scientific issue to the recognition of a government. According to the UN, Afghanistan is ranked 6th among the countries most affected [by the climate crisis]. If the effect increases here, it will impact other countries of the world as well. We call on all countries to assist us and to restart suspended projects. This will benefit the residents of Afghanistan, not its government.

WOMEN'S ROLE AND RIGHTS

The contentious topic of women's roles and rights, including full access to education and work, received little explicit attention in the accountability sessions. The government body that discussed the role of women at the greatest length was the Ministry of Virtue and Vice. This ministry has positioned itself as the main custodian and gatekeeper of what men and women, but particularly women, are and are not allowed to do.

Whereas the Virtue and Vice Ministry is widely seen as the body restricting women's rights, they themselves discussed their responsibilities in the context of protecting rights. In their view, the first obligation is to uphold the rights of God, which relates to the promotion of virtue and prevention of vice. The rights of the people are protected through the courts and complaints mechanisms. Human rights, in this view, cannot supersede what the Emirate considers divine ordinances regarding vice and virtue. In practice, as has been well-documented, the focus in this regard is largely on the surveillance and 'reform' of outward behaviour, particularly of women.[24] This was also reflected in the MoPVPV's reported achievements, particularly when discussing the work of their mohtasebin, or enforcers, who during their many visits to mosques, universities, schools, health centres, sports venues, markets, parks, transportation routes, hotels and restaurants had, among other things, advised on the observance of the hijab and the rules on travelling with a mahram.

Otherwise, the Virtue and Vice Ministry, like the wider Emirate, presented itself as a defender of women's rights. After a brief discussion of how the ministry had worked to prevent the buying and selling of girls, including the practice of *baad* (giving a

[24] See, for instance, AAN reporting here, here and here.

woman in marriage to resolve a blood debt or feud), the spokesperson laid out the rights of women under the current system:

> *The Islamic Emirate has specified the rights of women, and men are obliged to consider them. These include the right to a mehr [bride price], the right to inheritance, the right to choose [a husband] and the right to living costs. The Supreme Leader has issued a special decree to this effect. Significant steps have been taken to secure these rights for women. If brothers do not give inheritance to their sisters, the sisters have the right and have been authorised by the Islamic Emirate to complain and write a petition and get their rights. No one has the courage and authority to deny the inheritance rights of their sisters. The decree of the leadership of the Emirate is being seriously implemented by the Ministry of Virtue and Vice.*

When in the Q&A session, a journalist asked what the Emirate would do about fathers and brothers who did not give their daughters and sisters their rights and inheritance, military deputy Shahidkhel stressed the principle rather than a practical recourse:

> *The holy religion of Islam has established duties and responsibilities for husbands and wives that are complete, comprehensive, explicit and clear and there is no room for controversy or conflict. Islam has established the right to inheritance for all men and women. No one can deny it. All Muslims are obliged to pay it and the Islamic Emirate is obliged to provide everyone's rights according to sharia. A woman's first right is her bride price: it is her right and belongs to her, not to anyone else. None of the girl's guardians, neither the parents nor the husband, have the right to take anything from her bride price for their own benefit. The second right a woman has over her husband is the provision of living costs and expenses: food, clothing, housing and medical treatment, according to people's customs and the ability of her husband. If a husband, brother or father violates the rights of a woman or oppresses her, we have the courts: primary, appeal and the Supreme Court. They [the women] can complain and write a petition and their problems will be solved according to sharia.*

The question was asked again in the Supreme Court session. The answer initially focused on the payment of government salaries and women's employment before

moving on to the issue of inheritance and, finally, how rights and claims would be dealt with:

> *While foreigners have put limits on the Emirate, the Islamic Emirate is devoted to upholding all the rights of its residents, regardless of gender. Despite these limits, the Islamic Emirate continues to pay the salaries of all the employees who serve in the government. Women are at home, but the Islamic Emirate is dedicated to upholding their rights and according them the privileges they once enjoyed. Women continue to occupy the majority of office positions. In accordance with sharia, we grant women full rights. The Amir al-Mu'minin issued a special decree to this effect, granting women the ability to inherit. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan seeks to create a thorough plan before granting all women the ability to work, in accordance with our national traditions and sharia law. Of course, I disagree with the Western position, and the Emirate cannot compromise on this with anyone. But if a claimant approaches the court over an issue, the court is required to address it; however, if the claimant chooses not to approach the court, the court cannot compel someone to file a claim or demand their rights.*

Both replies indicate that rights, in this respect, are mainly viewed as the right to register a complaint or claim when people feel they have not been dealt with fairly. The government is not obliged to proactively protect or act when it comes to the violation of rights, unless they concern the rights of God.

Women and girls' education

The topic of women and girls' education was almost entirely passed over during the formal presentations. The Ministry of Higher Education and the National Examination Authority did not mention it at all, presumably since there were no plans or achievements to report. The Ministry of Education cited school enrolment figures indicating that, in the preceding year, around 45 per cent of the newly registered pupils and 40 per cent of the total had been girls (roughly 4 out of 10 million pupils).[25] During the Q&A, it was clarified that out of the four million female

[25] School enrolment figures for 1402/2023 provided by the Ministry of Education were: 1,256,075 newly registered pupils, of whom 565,801 were girls, bringing the total number of school-going children to 10,189,634, of whom 4,044,574 were girls. During the Q&As it was clarified that 1.3 of these four million girls were in the seventh to twelfth grade and had had their lessons suspended. An additional 35,828 boys and 59,247 girls were reported to have received an education in 3,780 rural rapid education classes by partner institutions. The grades were not specified.

pupils, 2.7 million were enrolled in the first to the sixth grade and 1.3 million in the seventh to the twelfth grade and for them, "lessons are suspended." That brought the percentage of girls actively enrolled in school at the time down to just over 25 per cent.

The Ministry of Education further specified that almost half of the newly appointed teachers in the Islamic education programme were women (489 out of 1,107, or 44 per cent).[26] 10,808 of the 36,203 students who were newly enrolled in the Islamic education programme were girls, bringing the total number of pupils in public and private Islamic education centres to 330,950, almost a third (94,662) of which were girls.

The issue of access to education for women and girls may not have featured during the presentations, but it dominated the Q&A sessions. All three journalists who asked questions of the Ministry of Higher Education raised the issue of reopening universities to female students. The first (from ToloNews) did so most extensively, before others were asked to be more brief:

> *People expect the doors of universities to be opened to women. How long will this "[closed] until further notice" continue and when will the universities be accessible to women? Where did the work of the committee [to allow girls back into universities] end up? How many of the more than 400,000 students are boys and how many are girls? Why could girls not take the kankur [school graduation] exam, despite receiving forms?[27] [questions have been condensed].*

The acting Deputy Minister of Higher Education provided no substantial answers and referred to the committee that had been tasked to work on the issue (as all Emirate officials who are asked this question continue to do):

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[26] The MoE's Islamic education programme involves the accelerated establishment of madrasas, dar-ul hefazes (Quran memorisation centres) and dar-ul ulums (seminaries), as well as the recruitment of religious teachers. According to deputy minister for Islamic studies Mawlawi Keramatullah Akhundzada, the Emirate had approved an added tashkil of 100,000 religious teachers in 1402/2023 (after already adding 13,800 positions in 1401/2022). At the time, they were working to fill around 30,000 vacancies (and had appointed 1,107). The approval of 100,000 new posts increased the ministry's total tashkil by 35 per cent (from 298,200 to 398,200). More increases in the Islamic education programme were expected.

[27] Other questions that were asked of the Ministry of Higher Education included: *How many professors are currently in government universities and how many have fled? After the university gates were closed to girls, some professors resigned. How many and what was the result? Why aren't female journalists permitted to cover the news at events organised by the Ministry of Higher Education and the university?*

The only question not related to education for women was: *How many active public and private universities are there in the country and how many new licenses have you issued?*

A committee is working on the plan to reopen universities for girls. Once it's finished, it will be shared with the country's citizens. The Ministry of Education, along with several other institutions, are members of this committee. As for setting a timescale, I can't do that because the committee has been established and is working on it. Once their work is finished, they'll share it with the people. It's too early to say when the universities will open [to girls].

Women and children watch as virtue and vice ombudsmen speak to a man at the Tap-e Gul Ghundi park in Charikar, Parwan Province.
Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 17 April 2024

This seemed to raise the pressure for the upcoming session of the Ministry of Education, where out of the nine journalists who spoke, six (separated below) raised the issue of women and girls' education in a barrage of questions:

- *When can girls above sixth grade go to school again? How much has the committee's work progressed? Can you tell us, since the Ministry of Higher Education says the problem lies with the Ministry of Education?*
- *How far have the changes in the educational curriculum for girls come? Have you made changes and to which subjects? How many girls and children in the*

whole country are deprived of education and how many have access to education?

- *You stated that four million girls are studying, does that include the girls who are at home? The school doors have not been opened for two years since your government took power – when will they be?*
- [*A female journalist] I am happy to represent the girls that aren't going to school: what do you have to say about their wishes and hopes? What happened to the commission that was formed, what have they done? What will reopening the schools entail, what do they want from you? Why should they not open? What is your plan for reopening the schools?*
- *It's said that female teachers are stopped from teaching. Please let us know, with details, whether this is true or not. Are female professors who used to teach high school classes still teaching now?*
- *What do you say to the criticism that during the previous era of the Islamic Emirate, you claimed schools would be opened, but nothing of the sort ever happened and now schools still haven't been opened and won't be?* [questions have been condensed][28]

The Ministry of Education wasted even fewer words on the topic. Acting Deputy Minister for Education Resources, Mawlawi Sebghatullah Wasil, who was tasked with replying to the questions relating to girls' education, hesitated, shuffled in his seat and then simply said he believed the various leaders of the Emirate had already provided sufficient explanations. This was followed by a somewhat stunned silence and follow-up questions were cut short.

The Virtue and Vice Ministry was asked what its role would be if the Ministries of Education or Higher Education proposed a plan to reopen schools and universities for girls, since they had been closed for reasons of "a lack of Islamic hijab and a safe environment for girls." Here too, the reply largely sidestepped the question:

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[28] Questions asked of the Ministry of Education that were not related to girls' education included: *Can you give us information about religious schools, has their number increased or decreased? Also, in many provinces, graduates from the twelfth grade have problems getting their certificates, can you provide information about this issue? What plans are there to build new school buildings, how many have been built? Did the exam for the recruitment of 1,000 new positions in religious schools already take place and how many teachers have been hired? How many teachers does the MoE lack and how many are needed? Do you have plans to increase the salary of teachers? A large number of graduates have applied for vacant positions in the MoE. Unfortunately, for two years, those who aren't qualified have been appointed. What's your plan for those who are waiting?*

> *The task of each office is clear. The goal and duty of our department is to reform society, whether in the civil or military sector. We don't want to interfere in someone else's work. This question belongs to the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and should be answered by them, not us. But I want to clarify that there are two [kinds of] policies regarding education and higher education all over the world: general policies and specific policies. The system determines general policies – these are the law or the constitution – and specific policies are determined by the Ministry of Education, in light of the general policy.*

The person who did engage with the topic was the head of the National Examination Authority, Sheikh Abdul Baqi Haqqani, who had been acting Minister of Higher Education when the universities initially reopened in 2021 and 2022, although he also sidestepped the question of what exactly would happen.

When asked about the fate of all the women and girls who had been given *kankur* exam cards but not been allowed to participate, Haqqani started by saying that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan had proven it meant to keep universities open for all, by allowing private universities to reopen swiftly, followed later by government institutions.[29] He acknowledged that there had been problems, but said they had sought to focus on the solutions. He then turned around and blamed the media which, he said, had played a negative role:

> *From the first day, the government's policy was that the universities would remain open for boys and girls. You saw that one week after the victory, we allowed 150 [private] universities to continue and then, a very short time later, 40 Emirate [government] universities were opened. Policy is one thing, society's problems are another and our collective responsibility is yet another. We have a responsibility in our field and you have a responsibility in yours. There's no doubt we have problems, we experienced a 20-year war, so there will be problems in every field. But we were trying to find solutions and not reflect the negative things, so that the nation and the world wouldn't become aware of our problems. Thank God, things were organised and as you saw, the system ran for over a year. The government's policy was positive and higher education was providing its services.*

[29] For more details on the reopening of universities under the Emirate, see AAN's 2023 report: 'The Emergent Taleban-Defined University' by S Reza Kazemi.

> *Now, we have successfully provided accountability to the nation, but you also have a responsibility towards this nation. And we know each other very well. In that period of more than one year, when everything was going well, I didn't see a single journalist commenting positively, saying: This government has done a good job and paved the way for the education of our sisters. I can't say everyone, but some reflected negative points to the world. We should tell the facts.*
>
> *If a day comes for the nation to hold you accountable, you will fail, but we have passed. We had problems and were seeking solutions, but you, the media, were negatively reflecting them. The result was that the leaders were obliged to ponder it all and [first] make a satisfactory atmosphere and [only] then allow girls to go to universities. Now, efforts are being made to create that atmosphere. We both have a responsibility in front of the nation. But the media and our friends here were showing that there were Islamic shortcomings in the country. I know all the national and international journalists who were making negative propaganda, but we'll leave it for the nation to judge. The nation knows both of us. It was my role to run the system for both girls and boys for over a year, and the role I just mentioned was yours.*[30]

A few other institutions were also asked about education for women and girls, including the Technical and Vocational Education and Training Authority (TVET), the Academy of Sciences and, indirectly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The TVET, when asked, specified that they had 28,000 female students (out of a total of 86,000) and that, in line with IEA policy, those women had been banned from participating in the courses until further notice. It added that whenever the IEA leadership cleared the way for women to study again, TVET would also restart its courses for women.

The Academy of Sciences was asked whether they had done any research on the education of girls from the perspective of Islam or whether they thought such research was necessary to conduct and present the views to the Emirate leadership. The Academy's secretary, Dr Niazi, said it had already published books and treatises and organised seminars but, if necessary, would do more, adding that this was a

[30] The journalist who asked the question replied: "We've also done a lot of positive work during the last year, you can check our archives. We're serving the nation, not foreign countries, but the nation expects us to ask why girls cannot take the exam?" To which Haqqani replied: "Now I'll give you the proper answer: The question should be answered by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education. When they've prepared everything, they'll bring us the forms and questions and tell us to give the exams and we'll give them. So, the answer to your question doesn't relate to me. I just added something, that you should pay attention to your own responsibilities too."

general and temporary issue that the Emirate was pondering, for which it was trying to find a solution.

Primary school girls walk near Shuhada Lake in Kabul.
Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 24 March 2024

The issue was also raised with the acting Minister of Foreign Affairs when he was asked, for a second time, why the US and European countries would not recognise or engage with the Emirate ("Do those countries only have the opening of girls' schools as their condition for recognition, or do they have other demands as well?"). He replied that there had been no clear conditions and that he considered the issues that had been raised to be "excuses," but did not address, or even mention, the issue of girls' education.[31]

[31] The acting Minister of Foreign Affairs said:

When it comes to recognition, I think Western countries use recognition as pressure. So far, we've not been presented with any specific conditions so we could know we could be recognised after fulfilling them. The issues the world mentions – like inclusive government, human rights and security matters – so far, based on our studies, there's no country in the world that was recognised or had their recognition removed for these reasons. Therefore, we can call it an excuse.… In the past twenty years, around 50 countries, together with the Afghan National Security Forces did not solve these issues [insecurity and narcotics] and wouldn't have been able to [solve them] in the way we've solved them. The other issues are domestic matters belonging to Afghanistan and we hope the realities will be understood more in the future.

Women and employment, recreation and health

The issue of women and employment, though less contentiously so, did come up in some of the presentations and questions. The Ministry of Economy, for instance, when asked, specified that "92,000 women work in the education sector and 14,000 in the health sector, they work in airports, banks, but as already mentioned, efforts are ongoing to prepare a suitable environment for women." That apparent need to prepare a suitable environment was a recurring shorthand used to justify restrictions, deflect criticism and ask for patience.

When questioned, the Ministry of Interior clarified that around 1,955 policewomen were serving in different fields and receiving salaries, saying: "The people of Afghanistan, of course, need the services of women. Women are present not only in the military [branches] but also in civilian sectors, like the passport department and crime detection – wherever they're needed."

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI) reported providing 7,263 business licences, 1,000 of which were to women.[32] It claimed close coordination with the private sector, including the Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which it said was one of the most active chambers. The Ministry of Mines said revenue from mines was used to pay the salaries and expenses of the national army, the Ministry of Interior, the intelligence directorate and millions of government employees, and emphasised that: "Women are also being paid. No one has been sacked."

The National Olympic Committee was asked about "women who won medals in international competitions in more than 20 sports and were now no longer allowed to work or compete," but either misunderstood the question or chose not to answer it (an official replied that they had allowed all 20 fields of sport to be active). When asked after last year's announcement that it was building a sports complex for women, the NOC spokesman clarified that, first of all, the Asian and International Olympic Councils had not shown much interest in the proposal. Second, the Emirate's leadership had ordered all women's clubs and gymnasiums in Kabul to be closed. He said:

[32] In April 2024, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry updated the figure to 12,000 work permits distributed to businesswomen over the previous two years, saying the women were working in seven sectors including health, agriculture, industry and services (see reporting here).

> *When we contacted the ministry [of Virtue and Vice], they said they'd given some rules and regulations to these clubs on how to conduct their sports and training, but they [the clubs] had not complied and so they'd been forced to close them. That's why the International Olympic Committee is not interested in the sports complex. But the proposal and design are available and when conditions are met, we will inshallah take the next steps.*

The acting Minister of Justice, in response to a question about how many of the former Republic-era judges were still working for the Emirate, instead spoke about female equality under Islam – possibly prompted by the fact that the next question would be asked by a female journalist.

> *You know well that, in general, the responsibility of males and females is alike. In the majority of the laws, men and women are partners. It is the order of sharia that in the Quran the man is addressed, for instance, in the order to pray, but women have a similar responsibility; it doesn't mean that a man should pray and a woman shouldn't. The woman shares in the orders. So, in the laws of responsibility [mokalafiat], men and women are partners. Of course, some laws are specified for women. You know well, that the Amir al-Mu'minin has announced many orders regarding women: they should not be given because of revenge (baad) should be given their rights in inheritance, the details of which might have reached you through the media.*

During the Ministry of Virtue and Vice's Q&A session, journalists asked about the ban on women visiting parks and the closure of women-only places like hairdressers and gyms.[33] As with education and sports, the spokesperson blamed the closures on failures to follow the rules. The consequences of that failure were only for women, however:

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[33] The questions that were variously asked by different journalists of the Ministry of Virtue and Vice were: *Some time ago, women hairdressing salons were closed and a great number of women became unemployed. They said instructions had been given to them by your office. This is while only women work there and only women go to the female hairdressing salons, not men. What made you close those beauty salons? And will they remain closed or will they be reopened? The acting Deputy Minister said all citizens have equal rights, but women who are already a marginalised part of society have been banned from parks. Where should they go for recreation? Will the parks be closed to women permanently? Also, some women are sick and have to exercise, but the places that were created for that purpose are closed to women. Since they were created only for women and managed by women, wouldn't it be better to reopen those places so women can exercise?*

> *We had given a 14-article resolution to the Women's Hairdressing Union to deliver to all hairdressing salons. We checked the hairdressing salons six months later. Unfortunately, the articles hadn't been implemented and we had to close the salons.… Regarding the closure of parks, we asked the owners of the parks many times to separate the male and female areas or to have a curtain inside the park to separate men and women. But no one paid attention. In the second stage, we asked them to allocate some days to men and others to women – that was also poorly implemented. We tried, to some extent, [to ensure] that everyone would be able to go to recreational places, whether women or men, but on separate days or at least with a curtain between them, but it didn't work. So, we were forced to ban women from going to parks. Regarding what might happen in the future, we'll discuss that when the time comes.*

Finally, there were also some discussions on women and health. The presentation of the Ministry of Public Health did not focus specifically on the situation of women, but several of the questions did, including queries with regard to statistics on maternal and child deaths, the number of women working in maternity and women's hospitals and concerns over a shortage of women doctors, especially since the Medical Council had not allowed female students to take exams in the last few years. In his reply, acting minister Qalandar Ebad proudly referred to laparoscopic operations (a minimally invasive surgical procedure) that could now be done in government hospitals:

> *A sister asked a question about gynaecology. We pay much attention to this because women make up about 50 per cent of our society and they demand and need health services. We've made the best efforts to provide short and long-term training programmes for doctors and midwives in each department, so they can provide proper healthcare to the people, even to the extent that specialist doctors of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan are now doing laparoscopic operations for the first time. These operations are performed by machines without cutting open the body. Around 40 female specialists were given nine months of training to do these operations by camera and they all passed the exam. The trained doctors can now perform laparoscopic operations at Malalai Maternity Hospital, Rabia Balkhi Hospital and other parts of the country. For female doctors, there are short online programmes at the international level, done by foreign donors within the framework of*

> *the Islamic Emirate. Women also participate in face-to-face programmes, according to the principles and laws of the Islamic Emirate, which are taught by women for women.*

Concerning the number of female doctors, he said:

> *Women account for 22 per cent of Ministry of Public Health personnel and we're trying to increase it to 25 or 30 per cent. We have almost 5,500 new posts and will try to allocate more posts to women because in our society, the services provided for mother and child [health care] and gynaecology are not as they should be. Our big problem is human resources and qualified staff, which has been a disaster in the past. We're also trying to bring women to other specialised programmes, not only gynaecology, so that after they finish their specialised training, they can work as qualified surgeons, orthopaedic surgeons, urologists, or paediatricians.*

WHAT LAST YEAR'S SESSIONS TELL US AND WHAT MIGHT BE AHEAD

The outside world, in particular Western countries that were heavily involved in Afghanistan during the Republic, sometimes assumes they must be the centrepiece in the Emirate's decisions and communication strategy. It was clear, however, that the primary audiences of the accountability programme were internal – the domestic media, the Afghan nation and the Emirate apparatus itself – and that the sessions were part of an effort to give words to both the nation and the administration as to where the country was headed. The overall tone animating the presentations was one of self-confidence and even pride to be part of an administration that had done a remarkable job under difficult circumstances. The media was consequently called upon to spread this message by portraying the Emirate's achievements, refraining from hostile propaganda and supporting the larger project of rebuilding the country and maintaining the nezam – a responsibility, according to Emirate officials, it shared with the government and the nation.

However, the absence of the Ministry of Finance, which had been present during the 2022 sessions, meant there was no sense of the administration's overall financial situation.[34] Also largely absent from the presentations was the actual shape of the security and intelligence apparatus and the ways the Emirate seeks to monitor and surveil the population, although some indications could be found in the individual presentations. The sessions shed no light on the interplay between the Emirate's formal administration in Kabul and the mechanisms of consultation and decision-making that surround the Supreme Leader and his entourage in Kandahar, which means that the country's actual architectures of power continue to remain opaque. The absence of the three key bodies in terms of the economic, security and ideological shape of the Emirate – Ministry of Finance, GDI and the Office of the Supreme Leader – seems to imply that they view themselves as, in the first place, serving the system and not owing the nation their accountability. Or perhaps they did not want to be asked difficult questions which would be broadcast live on radio and television.

What stood out was the consistency of messaging, across institutions and over time. This involved key speaking points – the 'temporary nature' of the restrictions on women, the primacy of the Islamic system, the ongoing need to reform the apparatus of the state and the population, especially through the work of the virtue and vice ministry, the focus on good relations with the outside world and the claims of remarkable progress with almost no outside funding – as well as details on key projects and the figures that underlined them. These key points were already present during the 2022 sessions, have continued to be shared and reiterated since the 2023 presentations, and are likely to feature heavily again in the upcoming round of accountability sessions.

This consistency of messaging makes it all the more interesting to see what might have changed or shifted, when comparing the 2023 presentations with the upcoming ones, which, if the previous schedule is maintained, should take place again in July/August 2024.

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[34] The Emirate's Ministry of Finance has been notably secretive about government spending, releasing only one three-month mini-budget for the last three months of 1400 (December 2021 to March 2022). The Republic, on the other hand, had been increasingly transparent about public finances in its latter years, publishing detailed budgets hundreds of pages long. For more, see AAN's 2023 report 'What Do The Taleban Spend Afghanistan's Money On? Government expenditure under the Islamic Emirate' and its companion piece on public finances from 2022, 'Taxing the Afghan Nation: What the Taleban's pursuit of domestic revenues means for citizens, the economy and the state'.

Since the 2023 sessions, the Emirate's language towards the rest of the world, particularly the West and the UN, has become more confrontational, albeit still firmly rooted in the framework of wanting good ties with all. This assertiveness towards the West has been coupled with a continued shift towards regional relations (see for instance this recent AAN report on the machinations surrounding the UN-hosted Doha II conference in March 2024). Although relations with Pakistan have been strained – with mass deportations, confrontations at the border, allegations of US drones over Afghanistan and accusations of Afghan support for the TTP – ties with Iran have been strengthened, as have relations with the region, including Turkey, Russia and China. Notably, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has just had its first foray on the international stage, beyond regional conferences. On 30 June-1 July, after its conditions for participation were met, the IEA took part in the third UN-hosted Doha meeting.[35]

Internally, there has been a continued push towards the Islamisation of government, including through giving an even greater role to the ulema and the inclusion of the religiously trained into the ranks of the government apparatus, including through accelerated recruitment, training and examination/qualification schemes. Provincial councils had already been replaced by provincial ulema councils, but ulema village councils are now being established. As AAN recently reported, the Supreme Leader abolished the Community Development Councils (CDCs), established under the Republic to channel aid at the local level, in May 2024, and has ordered government bodies to coordinate aid projects with ulema councils instead. The administration has further doubled down on what it considers to be sharia-based policies. It has continued the ban on education for women and girls beyond 6th grade and although it continues to maintain that the restrictions on women to education, work and access to public places such as

[35] This was considered to be a coup for the Emirate. The UN decided against inviting any Afghans other than officials of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to the meeting (an IEA condition for participation) and limited the agenda to issues deemed acceptable to the IEA – private sector and banking, counternarcotics and climate change. Women's rights were not on the agenda, but the UN did host a side event on 2 July, which was attended by some Special Envoys, with the participation of seven Afghan women and civil society members. Other than United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Rose Mary DiCarlo, who is in charge of the Afghanistan portfolio at the UN, and US Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights, Rina Amiri, none of the delegations appear to have included any women (see also Roza Otunbayeva, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, during a press briefing on 21 June).

parks, sports clubs and hairdressers are temporary, it has taken no visible steps to ease or lift them.[36]

Schoolboys during a ceremony to mark the start of the new academic year at the Amani High School in Kabul.
Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 20 March 2024

On the security front, several attacks on high-profile officials and places – including the killing of Balkh governor Muhammad Daud Muzamel in March 2023 – have led to increased security measures. Although there is currently no open armed resistance of any significance, Emirate officials are vulnerable to the same kind

[36] Recent examples of the continued dual messaging on the restrictions on women include a Shamshad interview in early March 2024 with acting Deputy Minister of Virtue and Vice, Sheikh Faqir Muhammadi, who reiterated that (on one hand) no one can marry or give away underage girls and (on the other hand) women must not be in a hurry about the resumption of their education since the Islamic Emirate was committed to giving them their rights in the light of Islamic sharia. He said that although the issue had "indeed become controversial, the order of the government about girls' education is clear: no one says their education is forbidden, but the order [to suspend education] has been issued until further notice."

When calls to reopen girls' schools increased ahead of the new school year, Emirate spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahed told Ariana News that there were indeed "some problems and grievances" regarding girls' education and "some restrictions on women's work" because of sharia laws or economic problems, but that the government was committed to solving them.

of attacks and infiltration that they once unleashed against the Republic. This might affect the messaging that security has been achieved, although it is equally likely it would not – the Emirate is treading a fine line between possibly leveraging the spectre of a global ISKP security threat in the international arena while downplaying its presence domestically. The wariness about attacks from the inside continues to make it unlikely the Emirate will be amenable to pressure to open up key positions to those from outside its own ranks.

The economy, which contracted over the IEA's first two years and has now flatlined, continues to pose major challenges for both the administration and the population (see recent World Bank reporting). The approval of this year's budget (1403 /2024) was delayed by two months, announced only in May 2024, presumably because of difficulties in matching the administration's expenses with projected income. According to the World Bank, an expanded government tashkil together with higher wages had pushed the 1402/2023 expenditure up by around 10 per cent compared to 1401/2022. Though the Emirate has been surprisingly efficient in terms of revenue collection and – with the help of substantial outside aid – has managed to avoid economic collapse, the economy continues to stagnate. In the first year of the re-established Islamic Emirate, the focus, in the words of the acting Minister of Economic Affairs, had been on avoiding economic collapse. In the second year, the focus was on boosting the economy as a tool of political legitimacy. In the third year, the Emirate has probably run into the limitations of further growing government revenues, in particular as the amount of back taxes still to be collected has dwindled.

The next round of accountability sessions now looms. It will be interesting to see how the third year of IEA rule will be framed, in particular: How will the mood be, what will be put forward as the main achievements and points of focus, and who will be blamed for the setbacks?

Edited by Roxanna Shapour and Kate Clark
Design and layout by Žolt Kovač

Cover photo: Officials from the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice address the media and the nation during the ministry's accountability session in Kabul.
Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 14 August 2023

ANNEX 1: THE EMIRATE'S 2023 ACCOUNTABILITY PROGRAMME, LIST OF PRESENTATIONS

	Session	Date	Platform
	Opening session: Prime Minister's Office	23/07/2023	GMIC
1	Ministry of Economy	23/07/2023	RTA
2	Ministry of Mines and Petroleum	24/07/2023	RTA
3	Ministry of Public Works	24/07/2023	RTA
4	Breshna Company	25/07/2023	RTA
5	Ministry of Commerce and Industry	26/07/2023	RTA
6	Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock	26/07/2023	GMIC
7	Commission for Prevention of Land-Grabbing	27/07/2023	RTA
8	National Standard Authority	29/07/2023	RTA
9	Railways Authority	29/07/2023	RTA
10	Ministry of Urban Development and Housing	30/07/2023	RTA
11	Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development	30/07/2023	RTA
12	State Ministry for Disaster Management	31/07/2023	RTA
13	Ministry of Border and Tribal Affairs	31/07/2023	RTA
14	National Development Corporation	01/08/2023	RTA
15	National Statistics and Information Authority	02/08/2023	RTA
16	Ministry of Interior	03/08/2023	RTA
17	Afghanistan Food and Drug Authority	05/08/2023	GMIC
18	National Environmental Protection Agency	06/08/2023	RTA
19	Kabul City Municipality	06/08/2023	RTA
20	Academy of Sciences	07/08/2023	RTA
21	Technical and Vocational Education and Training	08/08/2023	RTA
22	Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation	09/08/2023	RTA
23	Da Afghanistan Bank (Central Bank)	09/08/2023	RTA
24	Ministry of Telecommunications and IT	09/08/2023	RTA
25	National Olympic Committee	12/08/2023	RTA

	Session	Date	Platform
26	Office of the Prisons Administration	12/08/2023	RTA
27	Ministry of Martyrs and the Disabled	13/08/2023	RTA
28	Ministry of Virtue and Vice	14/08/2023	GMIC/RTA
29	Ministry of Hajj and Awqaf	14/08/2024	RTA
30	Ministry of Justice	16/08/2023	GMIC/RTA
31	Supreme Audit Office	16/08/2023	RTA
32	Ministry of Transport and Aviation	17/08/2023	RTA
33	Ministry of Energy and Water	17/08/2023	RTA
34	Ministry of Defence	20/08/2023	RTA
35	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs	20/08/2023	RTA
36	Ministry of Public Health	20/08/2023	RTA
37	Ministry of Higher Education	21/08/2023	RTA
38	Ministry of Education	21/08/2023	RTA
39	National Examination Authority	21/08/2023	RTA
40	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	22/08/2023	RTA
41	Supreme Court	22/08/2023	RTA
42	Ministry of Information and Culture	22/08/2023	RTA

Not all videos are complete. In some videos, part of the beginning is missing; in others, the Q&A session was not included. Where available, we have provided links to videos on different platforms in order to allow for the most complete recordings to be accessed.