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# **LAW, CONTROL, FEAR – AND SOME DEFIANCE: Citizens and enforcers talk about the ‘promotion of virtue and prevention of vice’**



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**It is now more than a year since the promulgation of a new vice and virtue law laying out what behaviour and actions the Islamic Emirate deems obligatory or forbidden for Afghan men and women. The law gives its enforcers wide-ranging powers – to both police and punish ‘wrongdoers’, who have no recourse to a court or the right to appeal. Male enforcers are also some of the very few men legally allowed to deal with unrelated women as part of their duties. This policing of women causes great distress and anxiety among Afghans, playing on the fear of women and their families that they will be ‘dishonoured’ if unrelated men question them on the street or – far worse – take them into detention. Yet, fear is also mixed with defiance.**

**Changing Afghans’ dress and behaviour to comply with the Emirate’s vision of sharia has been an abiding mission of the Taliban since they first emerged as a movement. However, unlike their first time in power, the Taliban’s second Emirate is able to focus fully on this mission: it is no longer distracted by war, is in full control of all of Afghanistan’s territory and has a functional state apparatus inherited from the Islamic Republic. The Ministry for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice was powerful during the first Emirate, but is even more formidable now, and far better resourced. The ramifications of the August 2024 law have been profound, as Kate Clark and the AAN team found when they heard from those experiencing it, both as citizens and enforcers.**

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	4
What is in the law .....	10
The new law on operational procedures for Amr bil-Maruf .....	13
Women's experiences of Amr bil-Maruf .....	17
Going outside .....	17
Families self-policing .....	21
Amr bil-Maruf in the workplace .....	24
Men's experiences of the law .....	27
Amr bil-Maruf punishments and their consequences .....	30
Going beyond the law .....	33
Regional differences .....	34
The enforcers' experience of the law .....	37
Getting a job, training and duties .....	37
Enforcing 'morality' in the capital .....	40
How the enforcers are viewed .....	43
How Amr bil-Maruf fits into people's sense of security and their wider concerns ...	45
Conclusion .....	48

## INTRODUCTION

When the Taliban recaptured power in August 2021,<sup>1</sup> one of their first acts was profoundly symbolic – turning the Ministry of Women’s Affairs into the Ministry for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice.<sup>2</sup> There was a consensus within the movement that it was a Muslim state’s duty to police the moral behaviour of its citizens. Although this is not the view of most Muslim countries, it does have precedents in Afghanistan, both under the monarchy and the 1992-96 mujahedin government of Burhanuddin Rabbani.<sup>3</sup> In that first year of the second Emirate, we reported on how both more moderate and more hardline ideas were being expressed within the movement as to what the vice and virtue enforcers (*muhtasibin*) should police, and how they should go about it.<sup>4</sup> That relative diversity of opinion appeared to stem from various factors that had affected the movement and Afghan society during its twenty years out of power.

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<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this report was published on the anniversary of the promulgation of the vice and virtue law: Kate Clark and the AAN team, [A year of Propagating Virtue and Preventing Vice: Enforcers and ‘enforced’ speak about the Emirate’s morality law](#), AAN, 21 August 2025.

<sup>2</sup> The full name of the ministry is the *Ministry of Promotion of Virtue, Prevention of Vice and Hearing Complaints* (*wazarat-e amr bil-maruf wa nahi an il-munkar wa sam-e shekayat*). See the ministry’s website [here](#).

How to translate the key part of that name, *amr bil-maruf wa nahi an il-munkar*, is debatable. In line with the ministry’s website, AAN has used ‘propagation of virtue’ in the past, and in this text, ‘promotion’, as the ministry now largely appears to be translating ‘amr’ for this word. Older translations of this Quranic phrase often speak of ‘enjoining’ virtue and ‘forbidding’ vice. The Arabic does carry the sense of an order or command.

<sup>3</sup> In Sabawoon Samim’s 15 June 2022 report, [Policing Public Morality: Debates on promoting virtue and preventing vice in the Taliban’s second Emirate](#), he wrote that, according to the Ministry of Justice’s official website, the Directorate of Ihtisab (accountability), also known as Amr bil-Maruf, was first introduced by King Nader Khan, in 1929, and formalised in 1930. During the reign of his son, Zahir Shah, the directorate, now employing 20 ulema, began working within the framework of the Supreme Court. See also Ghulam Muhammad Ghobar, *Afghanistan in the Course of History*, vol 2, Mohsin Publications, Kabul, 2018, p43.

*The mujahedin government of Burhanuddin Rabbani (1992-96) later established a Ministry for Propagating Virtue and Preventing Vice to regulate people’s behaviour and outward appearance as per their interpretation of sharia. It was this ministry that was retained and expanded by the Taliban when they captured Kabul and announced their first Emirate in 1996.*

<sup>4</sup> See the June 2022 report referenced in footnote 3 for more on this.



The IEA's then acting Prime Minister, Muhammad Hassan Akhund, and acting Minister for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice, Muhammad Khalid, during a gathering at the presidential palace in Kabul.

Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 13 August 2022

During the insurgency, Taliban commanders had to deal with activities that the movement had banned when in government, but which had become common practice. Many urban habits that, in the 1990s, seemed extraordinary to rural Afghans, the Taliban among them, had become established norms even in the movement's heartland of the rural south. Other activities had become possible because of new technology. Music and mobile phone selfies and photographs, for example, were commonplace even in remote regions. Many Afghan men trimmed their beards and sported 'Western' hairstyles and, in some places, there was a loosening of clothing norms for women. Families sent their daughters to school and growing numbers of women took up work outside the home. The insurgency itself had embraced photos and videos of living creatures, something that had been strictly banned as idolatrous by the first Emirate.

The greater variety of opinions within the movement on promoting virtue and preventing vice may have stemmed from the broader and more diverse base of officials and fighters during the insurgency, compared to the 1990s. Or the variety

of opinion may have reflected more general changes in Afghan society – of which the Taliban are a part; there can be significant cultural shifts over the course of two decades, particularly in such a young population. Compared to the first Emirate, insurgency-era commanders had been relatively tolerant of many activities deemed illegal in the 1990s, but that may merely have been a means of keeping compatriots onside because the war was more immediately important, rather than an indication that anything had changed fundamentally.<sup>5</sup> In the end, however, it was the Amir, Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, and his hardline conception of sharia that came to dominate the movement’s practice and policy in government, and he represents a continuity of the view of *amr bil-maruf* from the 1990s.

Most of the ‘morality’ rules progressively enjoined on the population since August 2021 have turned out to be the same as those of the first Emirate. Differences include a second clothing option, as outlined in a May 2022 order on ‘sharia hijab’ for women leaving the home, not only the burqa, which was obligatory in the 1990s, but also “customary black clothing and shawl.”<sup>6</sup> This is usually taken to refer to the Gulf Arab or Iranian-style ground-length black coats (*chapan siah*), or possibly to the bulky, black *chador* that covers head and body, worn by some Shia Muslim women. Either way, it should be worn with a face covering (*niqab*), although covering the eyes as well was made optional. Other examples of change from the 1990s are girls being allowed to go to primary school, rather than being banned from all education, and women having more sectors in which they can – other restrictions notwithstanding – legally take up paid work; in the 1990s, only health-related work was legal, along with a few other select occupations, such as, following a 2000

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<sup>5</sup> For more detail, see, [AAN Dossier XXIX: Living with the Taliban](#), 12 July 2021, which brought together research conducted between 2018 and 2021, first, into how public services were delivered in a number of insurgency-affected districts, and second, what it was like to live in areas that were completely under Taliban control.

<sup>6</sup> The May 2022 law on women’s clothing, ‘A brief descriptive and practical note regarding sharia hijab’, says (full text of the law in this [AAN report](#)):

Warning and threats:

- For the first time, after identifying the home of a hijable woman, her guardian [mahram] should be issued with advice and a warning.
- In the second instance, her guardian should be summoned to the relevant department.
- In the third instance, the guardian should be detained for three days.
- In the fourth instance, the guardian should be handed over to the courts for appropriate punishment.
- Women not adhering to hijab while working in the Emirate administration should be dismissed.
- If wives and daughters of government employees and civil servants do not adhere to hijab, their jobs should be suspended.

hijack, women body-searching female passengers at Kabul airport ([BBC](#)). Women working in the private sector have, so far, escaped a ban from the current Emirate.

The principle behind much of the Emirate’s Amr bil-Maruf regime is a drive to prevent *fitna* – temptation or the sort of social disorder that facilitates sin. Anand Gopal and Alex Strick van Linschoten, in their landmark report for AAN, published in 2017, [Ideology in the Afghan Taliban](#), described how, in the 1990s, when the Taliban were deciding whether to regulate an act, the imperative was to minimise the risk of the worst-case scenario, so for example, a chessboard could be used to commit the sin of gambling, so “the prudent course for the state is to prohibit it.” Such thinking is also seen explicitly in the current vice and virtue law, for example, that women must cover their faces, “not because it is a part of the body that should be concealed [ie according to even the Taliban’s understanding of sharia], but due to fear of fitna.” In keeping with the traditions of other conservative and patriarchal regimes, the law also places a greater burden on women as supposed ‘tempters’, rather than men as potential or actual transgressors.

Since the re-establishment of the Emirate in 2021, the power of the Ministry for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice has only grown, especially after Hibatullah issued the vice and virtue law by decree on 21 August 2024. That law consolidated and codified many of the Emirate’s existing rules, repeating some the Amir had already issued as decrees, orders or instructions, broadening others and adding some new types of behaviour or actions that became obligatory or forbidden. The law also laid out the duties and powers of those policing it – the enforcers who are charged with *amr bil-maruf wa nahi an il-munkar*, ‘promoting virtue and preventing vice’ (sometimes translated as ‘enjoining’ or ‘commanding’ virtue and ‘forbidding’ vice). In this report, we refer to ‘vice and virtue’ and to the shorthand used by Afghans, *amr bil-maruf*, capitalised when referring to the Amr bil-Maruf law, ministry or police.

This report begins with a short background to the law and the ministry, including a brief look at a more recent law, promulgated in August 2025, that outlines new procedures and ways of implementation. The report then moves on to its main subject: how citizens, especially women, experience Amr bil-Maruf and how enforcers experience their work. We hear how fearful it has made many women and their families, acting to discourage them from leaving the house at all, or only rarely, or only with a man, but that the law has also inspired defiance. The report includes personal testimonies concerning Amr bil-Maruf punishments. It highlights

the anomaly of vice and virtue enforcers being tasked with policing women when the law makes it illegal for unrelated men and women to interact – a contradiction that has opened a space up for abuse. It also explores geographical variations in how the state polices morality.



Young women walk home after attending a madrasa in Balkh province, wearing clothing as prescribed under the vice and virtue law.

Photo: Atif Aryan/AFP, 4 February 2025

The report then looks at the experiences of the enforcers, including how those we interviewed got their jobs, the (little) training they had received and their views on the nature of the ‘wrongdoing’ they encounter. It compares how enforcers and citizens view each other, noting not only the fear the enforcers engender, but also how the enforcers we interviewed, all from outside the capital but now working in Kabul, feel overwhelmed and alienated by Kabul and its population, especially its ‘rude women’.

Finally, the report hears about how safe people feel in light of the vice and virtue law and uncovers how they see it fitting with other aspects of Emirate rule, especially the laws on female education and paid work and the – all too often grinding – struggle to make ends meet.

### Box 1: The main crimes and obligations as outlined in the vice and virtue law

Women, if they must “leave home because of some urgent need,” must wear what the law calls ‘sharia hijab’ – the complete covering of the body, head and face, with eye covering optional – and conceal their voices. They must conceal themselves in front of unrelated men, “loose” women and foreign women.

Drivers of taxis and public transport are banned from taking female passengers unless a mahram accompanies them.

Men must wear loose clothing that covers them from waist to below the knee, have beards at least as long as their fists and not sport ‘unislamic’ haircuts. They must pray regularly, on time and in a mosque.

Unrelated men and women must not look at each other.

The media must not broadcast or publish content that contradicts sharia, insults Muslims or contains images of living beings.

Special injunctions apply to shopkeepers, farmers and artisans, including conducting all affairs according to the Hanafi school of Islam; avoiding usury and cheating; not selling any part of the human body; and paying ushr and zakat (under the Islamic Emirate, a tax on the harvest and increases in livestock). At tourist spots, mosques must be built and congregational prayers held.

The law bans adultery, fornication, lesbianism, anal sex and gambling; animal and bird fighting; making pictures of animate objects; befriending or helping non-Muslims or imitating their dress; not fasting during Ramadan; observing Nawruz and Shab-e Yalda (festivals on the spring equinox and winter solstice); dealing harshly with orphans; and, for children, disobeying their parents.

## WHAT IS IN THE LAW

As much of the 45,000-word law is in Arabic, we thought it a public service to get it translated into English: a short version, without footnotes, can be read [here](#) and a full version [here](#). The law lays out various restrictions and obligations on Afghan men and women. The main ones can be seen in Box 1. From our interviews, it appears that the rules most policed for both men and women are to do with their clothing, and for men, the length of their beards. Also heavily policed is sex-segregation, both in the workplace and in public spaces. The issue of mahrams, close male relatives who act as a woman’s chaperone and guardian, was also prominent – for women who were outside, whether or not they were accompanied by one, and for men who were outside with a woman, whether she was related to them, and they could, therefore, be together legally.

The virtue and vice law also details the duties and powers of the enforcers and sets out principles for them to abide by, including: “respect for everyone’s social standing and human dignity,” “not prying into people’s private sins,” and “avoiding entering their homes.” It gives the enforcers far-reaching powers to police citizens’ behaviour and dress, and to punish, in almost all cases, without needing to take the ‘perpetrator’ to court. The enforcers thereby act as police, prosecutor and judge. The law lays out almost no checks or balances on the powers of the vice and virtue police. Officially, an enforcer should go through seven stages “once he sets sight on both the sin and the perpetrator,” escalating from exhortation, reminding them of the anger of God, threats and strong words, fines, detention – for 24 hours, and then up to three days for subsequent violations – and finally, “Any punishment that an enforcer considers appropriate, and which is not the exclusive prerogative of a court of law.” (article 24) The law thereby permits arbitrary punishment. There are no safeguards against torture or other ill-treatment, and the ‘accused’ is given no right to legal recourse or due process. That includes providing no means of appeal.

Within each government ministry, there is also a Directorate of Dawat wa Irshad (Invitation and Guidance), which acts like Amr bil-Maruf. The [Ministry of Justice website](#) explains that the directorates “receive instructions from the highest and most competent authorities of the relevant authorities in order to implement

Islamic rules,” and are charged with “establishing continuous order and discipline, inviting [employees] to congregational prayers and [ensuring] the presence of officials and employees, including all members of Invitation and Guidance, in the noon prayer.” The directorates are also tasked with providing religious education for employees. Sources say these directorates have the authority to fire employees who do not adhere to the law, including regulations concerning authorised dress codes and the length of men’s beards. In a time of high unemployment, the prospect of losing one’s job is a serious threat.

On 10 April 2025, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) published its [Report on the Implementation, Enforcement and Impact of the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice Law in Afghanistan](#), which looked at the broad social and economic impact of the law on health, education, business and the media, in particular at the effect on women and girls. It is also packed with information about the rollout of the law.<sup>7</sup> UNAMA reported that there were approximately 3,300 male enforcers employed throughout the country, with numbers varying by province, for example, 14 enforcers in Paktia and Paktika and 540 in Kabul. It also described how, in October 2024, after the Amir ordered provincial governors to implement the law, governor-led provincial vice and virtue committees had been established in at least 28 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces. In some places, UNAMA noted, there were also sub-committees, such as one to supervise the implementation of the law at Parwan University, or in Pul-e Khumri in Baghlan province, a committee in each of the city’s mosques. “The inter-institutional implementation and enforcement infrastructure and reach into society the law allows,” said UNAMA, “is indicative of the law’s importance and the philosophy behind it, to the *de facto* authorities’ governing vision.”

UNAMA found only one province where female enforcers were operational, and then only in the provincial capital (Baghlan’s Pul-e Khumri). In some areas, it said an intention to hire female enforcers was reported or that “female volunteers, mostly students and teachers from local madrassas, or female police staff” were supporting local enforcement efforts or provincial departments were “unofficially pay[ing] women to monitor and report on compliance.”

Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan Richard Bennett [analysed](#) the law within a human rights framework (March 2025). He concluded

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<sup>7</sup> UNAMA also published an earlier report, in July 2024, with a specific human rights focus: [De Facto Authorities’ Moral Oversight in Afghanistan: Impacts on Human Rights](#).

that it provided for “wide-ranging violations of human rights” and was having “devastating impacts and consequences” for Afghans, especially women and girls. He placed the law within “the broader context of Taliban policies” to argue that Afghanistan was now “the epicentre of an institutionalized system of gender-based discrimination, oppression and domination that amounts to crimes against humanity, including the crime of gender persecution.”



A man replaces the Department for Women's Affairs sign with the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice on the entrance gate in Kandahar.

Photo: Tanveer/AFP, 20 October 2021

The Afghan human rights NGO, [Rawadari's 2024 annual report](#), is also full of references to the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice Law and its enforcers. It noted an increase in “arbitrary and unlawful arrests” by both Amr bil-Maruf and the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI), which it attributed partly to the introduction and full enforcement of the vice and virtue law after August 2024. It gives wide-ranging examples of enforcers breaching Afghans’ human rights, including two journalists detained in a shipping container in Ghazni for beard and clothing infringements, and the shutting down of a girls’ educational centre in Baghdis province that taught English.

A critique of the law from an Islamic scholar’s point of view, commissioned by AAN, was published in April 2025.<sup>8</sup> We had asked John Butt to translate the law, which is in a mixture of Dari/Pashto and Arabic, and consider it from the viewpoint of Islamic teachings and history. Butt is a former BBC journalist and a graduate of the Deoband seminary in India, the key seminary informing the Islamic thought of most Afghan Sunni clerics, including the Taliban. He raised many issues, including the Emirate taking on the role of both legislator – deciding what is *maruf* (virtue) and *munkar* (vice) – and police. He questioned why the law was so focused on women and whether regulating the press was really part of sharia. He also surveyed the law in light of earlier examples of promoting virtue and preventing vice that were both broader and more positive and wondered at the sheer amount of verbiage expended in the legislation and at the cherry-picking of sources.

For this report, we wanted to get a clearer idea, one year on, of how the law was being implemented and something of its granular impact on people. This report draws on in-depth interviews with six women and three men in a variety of urban locations: Bamyan, Herat city, Mazar-e Sharif, Ghazni, Herat, Qalat, Loya Paktia and Kabul. Some of the interviewees had travelled and could also compare their experiences of Amr bil-Maruf in different provinces. The author, visiting Kabul in October and November 2025, also had conversations with a wide range of people in the capital to gain a broader view of the situation there, and heard from a few more people in Mazar, Kandahar, Herat and Loya Paktia. Finally, we also conducted in-depth interviews with three male enforcers in Kabul, who spoke about how they had come to work in the ministry and what it was like trying to police ‘morality’ in the Afghan capital.

## The new law on operational procedures for Amr bil-Maruf

Since the research for this report was carried out, the Emirate has published a new law, The Procedure for the Committees Enforcing the Law on the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice.<sup>9</sup> Signed by Mawlawi Hibatullah in January 2025, it was published in the Official Gazette on 27 August 2025. The law was drawn up by Kandahar’s provincial Amr bil-Maruf committee “under the oral guidance of the Amir,” with the draft finalised following minor changes after a meeting with officials

<sup>8</sup> See John Butt, [A Force for Good, or Source of Coercion? An Islamic scholar reflects on the Emirate’s morality law](#), AAN, 21 April 2025.

<sup>9</sup> The law was announced on the [Ministry of Justice website](#).

from the Ministries of Amr bil-Maruf, Hajj and Awqaf, Education and Justice. The bulk of the law (19 out of 29 pages) is taken up with an introduction explaining and justifying the need for amr bil-maruf, including such passages as:

*If the practice of enjoying good and forbidding evil is abandoned and negligence takes hold, then the duty of prophethood will be suspended, piety will vanish and there will be a general weakness in religion. Misguidance and ignorance will increase, corruption will become widespread, disobedience will spread, cities will be destroyed, the servants [of God] will perish and they will not be called to judgement until the Day of Resurrection, and alas, this has come to pass.*

The introduction says that people are like animals, chasing their personal desires and passions. “The true believers on the earth” are few and therefore “whoever strives to prevent this laxity ... has chosen a degree of nearness to God, the Exalted, for which all other degrees of nearness are lower in comparison to its loftiness.” It also says that:

*Enjoining good and forbidding evil are among the important obligations and great rulings and symbols of Islam, and they are the cause of every person’s righteousness and salvation, while neglecting them is one of the factors leading to a person’s destruction.*

The concept of Amr bil-Maruf is an accepted tenet of sharia, both Sunni and Shia, that Muslims have a duty to advise and enjoin one another to good and prevent wrongdoing. It is rooted in the Islamic principle of *hisbah* (accountability). As to how to practise it, there have been centuries-old debates among Islamic scholars, particularly on the extent to which it should be allowed to infringe on the privacy of community members. As noted previously, only a few Muslim countries have formalised amr bil-maruf as a state institution tasked with policing the lives and behaviour of their citizenry, notably Iran, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, where the morality police’s powers were sharply curtailed in 2016 – including losing the authority to arrest – after protests and an internal power struggle. The Emirate’s August 2025 law does not go into why it is the state’s duty to enforce amr bil-maruf. Like the 2024 vice and virtue law, this is assumed. Rather, it looks to be aimed at galvanising the whole of government and mobilising the private sector – business, educational, religious and wider civil society – to help with enforcement.

The law ordered central and provincial-level enforcement committees to hold meetings with government officials to “explain the importance of the law” and to

compel the committees, their colleagues, subordinates and the “mujahedin under their command” (ie Taliban), to comply with the law.”<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Education officials should hold meetings with state schools and madrasa principals who, in turn, “should hold meetings for teachers and students and oblige them to comply with the law.” Physical education departments should also hold meetings with officials in charge of games, sports and sports competitions to, again, “explain the importance of the vice and virtue law and oblige them to practice and implement it.”

The Procedure Law also ordered the committees to hold meetings with various non-state individuals and bodies to request their cooperation in enforcing the law: 10 to 15 ulema [Islamic scholars] and madrasa teachers in each city police district or rural district; “pious and influential individuals who are looked up to by the people, are popular and not disliked, from all the city police districts and rural districts”; those in charge of private schools, academies and computer and language centres and their students; all officials and lecturers in universities, private universities and institutes; and “employees of the chamber of commerce, industries, companies, unions and factories.”

Going forward, the provincial directors of the vice and virtue ministry should visit police districts and rural districts from time to time, hold meetings and seminars and ask for cooperation in implementing the law from “the authorities, the noble scholars, the influential elders and mujahedin.”

The Ministry of Amr bil-Maruf was also ordered to hold a seminar for all enforcers in the cities and districts, “explaining to them the importance of the law and teaching them, as if in a lesson, so that they are very aware of the law and carry out their responsibilities based upon it.”

This report does not scrutinise the Emirate’s implementation of the Procedure Law or its apparent efforts at mass mobilisation to ensure compliance with the August 2024 law. The impact, if any, is yet to be played out. However, it is worth asking why the Emirate felt it necessary to pass the Procedure law at all. Does it suggest a belief that the current system is not working effectively enough? Was it driven by a lack of resources and the perceived need to increase enforcement efforts without having to pay salaries? Or is it an attempt to insinuate Amr bil-Maruf into more aspects of

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<sup>10</sup> The meetings should be: at the central level, with central heads, directors, department chiefs and other officials; and at the provincial level with district governors and police chiefs, department heads, highway officials and other officials.

national and private life? With regard to the article ordering extra training for the enforcers, is this an acknowledgement that some are not very aware of the vice and virtue law and are operating outside it?

In the following sections, the experiences of citizens – women and men – as well as those of the three enforcers are relayed.

*All names have been changed to protect interviewees’ anonymity, as well as other identifying details where relevant.*

*Worth noting is that interviewees quite often refer to women “not wearing hijab” (bi-hijab). This does not mean the women are not covering their heads, but that they are wearing clothes that are less bulky or less covering than the speaker thinks is ‘proper’ or ‘permissible’.<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> The enforcers interviewed used ‘bi-hijab’ to refer to women not adhering to the Taliban’s conception of ‘sharia hijab’, as outlined on page 6. However, the term is used far more widely in Afghanistan. See, for example, this June 2021 AAN report from Herat about some young women choosing not to wear the *chador*, a large, black, head-to-foot cloak, in favour of the *shaal*, a large headscarf that covers a woman’s head and upper body, with appropriate clothing underneath. Both modes of dress cover the body entirely, but leave the face exposed. See Reza Kazemi, [“A Future of One’s Own”: One young woman’s struggle to thrive in modern Herat](#), AAN, 21 June 2021.

## WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES OF AMR BIL-MARUF

That implementation of the law is skewed towards policing women came across strongly in our interviews: women have been hardest hit by the law and its enforcement, with pressure both directly from Amr bil-Maruf and via women’s families to change their behaviour and dress. All six of the women with whom we conducted in-depth interviews now complied with, or largely complied with, the law. All but one, however, were still fearful of the enforcers. Some still felt pressure at work and, all but one, reported that going outside at all had become difficult or risky.

### Going outside

Aisha is a **former government employee who now runs a small business from her home in Herat**. She has not been stopped by Amr bil-Maruf herself, but said that was only because she now rarely leaves the house:

*I don’t go out often because I’m afraid of all the Taliban, not only their enforcers. I’ve heard a lot of things here in Herat, so I’m very careful. If I do go out, I observe full hijab, but I don’t only rely on that. I also have a mahram with me. So being afraid and being careful has helped me stay safe.*

In another of Afghanistan’s great cities, **Mazar-e Sharif, factory owner and businesswoman Safira** said she had been stopped by Amr bil-Maruf three times:

*Once, I was in a group of women shopping in the city and they stopped us, even though we were wearing full hijab – the black clothes and niqab. They told us, “You should be wearing burqas. You shouldn’t be coming out of your homes and walking on the street [dressed] like that. We don’t want to see you like this again.”*

The second time she was stopped, Safira said, she was with her husband. The enforcers separated the couple and questioned each, quizzing them about the names of the other’s relatives. When the answers matched, they let them go. The third time, it was again about her clothing:

*You know, we hadn't committed any crime. They said we weren't wearing proper hijab, but that wasn't true. They weren't polite when they stopped and questioned us. They looked wild and we were terrified of them. This is the story of all women, including the women who were with me and other women, stopped by the enforcers. They didn't harm us, but they looked at us wildly and made us fear them.*

After that third incident, Safira said, she rarely goes out.

Mazar has a reputation for having a tough governor, who is a close ally of the Amir, and a harsh vice and virtue regime. At first, after the change of government, said one interviewee, most people continued to wear whatever clothes they had worn during the Republic, although, because it was the Taliban's second period in power, they knew what would, eventually, be expected of them. The Taliban slowly began telling people that women should wear 'proper hijab'. Although some women ignored them, once the Amr bill-Maruf law was introduced and the Taliban became serious about implementing it, women have had to comply. The interviewee said that, both in government offices and elsewhere, men were now tending to grow beards, wear caps and *pirhan tomban* – also known as *shalwar kameez* – a long tunic and light, loose, pleated trousers favoured by the Emirate, which opposes men wearing trousers and other 'Western' clothing. The changes had come in after the 2024 vice and virtue law.

Kabul, however, appears to be different, at least for now. People there spoke not only of their fear of the enforcers but also of the necessity of resisting them. Visiting Kabul in October and November, the author was struck by just how few women were adhering to the Taliban dress code. Fewer women appeared to be wearing burqas or a chapan siah with a face veil than under the Republic or in the early days of the Emirate, an impression confirmed by interviewees in the capital. A chapan siah is typically sold with a black headscarf, niqab and a further gauzy veil that can be pulled down to cover the face and eyes, so there are multiple options. However, long, belted coats and headscarves, with or without a medical mask, appeared the preferred option for women, and even those wearing a chapan siah typically matched it with a colourful scarf. Women might or might not be accompanied by a man.

"It's important not to give one inch to Taliban orders," one woman said, "because they will just keep taking more." Another said resistance was vital, despite the threat of Amr bil-Maruf. That threat is real. According to the UNAMA report cited earlier, there are relatively large numbers of vice and virtue enforcers in the capital, but they also have

a huge population to deal with, as many as five million.<sup>12</sup> That means it is bad luck to encounter enforcers when outside the house, but not impossible. Encounters, when they happen, can be very unpleasant, as two of our interviewees described.



Pensioners gather outside a government building in Kabul after the Emirate announced it would resume paying pensions. Few are obeying the vice and virtue dress code.

Photo: Bais Yusufi/AFP, 15 August 2025

**Hasina, an NGO worker living in Kabul**, now working from home, said: “Even when I go out fully covered, I still fear that the morality police might say something or insult me.” Since the law was enacted, she said, restrictions on women had increased significantly and they no longer had any freedom: “There is no place to relax, no chance to go outside for a walk. Even when we do go out, it’s with great fear that we might be arrested. Right now, life for women has become nightmarish.”

Hasina’s experience – that going outside had become far more difficult and dangerous – was typical for all but one of our female interviewees. **Pari, a midwife in Kabul**, for example, has to leave the house to go to work. She has difficulty

<sup>12</sup> Herat, Mazar and Kandahar, which also feature in this report, are among Afghanistan’s five largest cities, but all have far smaller populations, estimated to be under, or just over, one million.

breathing and her condition worsens if she covers her nose and mouth – as required by the law. She described three encounters with Amr bil-Maruf who, each time, insisted she cover her face:

*The third time ... I was near Pul-e Surkh when suddenly, I was surrounded from all sides by these Amr bil-Maruf officers – about six of them. All six grabbed my arms and said, “We warned you the other day not to wear these clothes or show your face like this again. Why didn’t you obey?” I was so terrified that I couldn’t even speak and was shaking. Eventually, with tears in my eyes, I said, “Mawlawi Sahib, I apologise. My clothes are fine, but I can’t wear a niqab because I have difficulty breathing; it feels like my heart is constricting.” He replied, “If you feel your heart constricting, then don’t go outside. Now, should I call the police to take you to the station?”*

She said they threatened to summon her family to the police station so that they could guarantee she would not go out barefaced in the future. When she heard these words, Pari said, her whole body began to tremble:

*One of them, who seemed kinder, said, “Daughter, go home now, but if you’re seen outside like this again, don’t complain. If we see you dressed like this and not covering your face one more time, we’ll take you straight to the police station and call your family to guarantee that you won’t walk around like this anymore.” I said, “Understood.” Then they let me go.*

Pari said she was left in a state of “absolute terror,” and now either asks her father to walk her to work or gets a car.

The one interviewee – male or female – who was not critical of Amr bil-Maruf was **Zarghuna, a primary school principal in one of the major towns in the southeast**. She explained that, because her province was “traditional,” the new law had made no difference to what women wore – they were already compliant. She and her fellow teachers continue to walk to work without mahrams. All of them “are from the same area,” she explained, “and so we don’t need mahrams.” Families can also still go out to recreational areas together.

However, she had also observed some changes. For the last two years, there had been a requirement for women to be accompanied to government offices and hospitals. Even women in need, if unchaperoned, she said, would now be turned away from hospitals. In her province, men generally do the shopping, but sometimes, women without a mahram or without a man at home do have to go

to the market and she said they had never faced a problem in the past. However, a clampdown had begun. Shopkeepers – including pharmacists – had been told that if women entered their shops without a mahram, they should not serve them. They had been warned, Zarghuna said, that if they were caught serving female customers, their pharmacy or shop would be closed and sealed. Some shopkeepers in the market, out of fear of the Taliban, would not now sell anything to female customers, not even medicine. “Women who don’t have a mahram at home,” she said, “are really facing problems.”

Men in her province, she said, have always held “all the authority,” but there had been progress over the last twenty years. Now, secondary and university education and most paid work was blocked for women and girls and “the ease and freedom that women had during the Republic has been taken away.” Day by day, she said, “the Taliban’s laws against women have increased, confining them to their homes.”

The threat of being spoken to, insulted, let alone arrested by Amr bil-Maruf, is proving a strong deterrent, ensuring many women not only keep to the Taliban’s dress code, but may also feel intimidated into not leaving the house altogether, or only rarely, or only with a man.

## Families self-policing

The pressure applied by Amr bil-Maruf on women goes beyond the individual. The threat of unrelated men admonishing or even arresting their wives, daughters or sisters has led many families to police their female relatives themselves, even if they disagree with the new rules. In Mazar-e Sharif, businesswoman Safira described her husband as a “broad-minded person,” who had previously been relaxed about her going out alone. However, following the new law and his wife being stopped by Amr bil-Maruf three times:

*He’s become very conservative, meaning he doesn’t let me go out alone. He might accompany me or ask our son to do so. I feel really concerned and it has caused problems for our family. My husband has brought these restrictions because he’s afraid that the enforcers might stop and detain me. We heard they’d even arrested women who were wearing hijab. Even if you’re fully covered, they might still find a pretext to take you with them.*

That men are responsible for their female relatives’ clothing is written into Emirate law. With the exception of female public sector workers, who can be sacked for

illegal clothing, all punishments – in theory at least – should accrue only to the guardian, but the pressure for families to control women goes far beyond this. **Parvez, a teacher from Ghazni**, explained why the threat to a woman’s honour and dignity is felt so powerfully by families: “In this traditional society, when Amr bil-Maruf arrests a woman or imprisons her, people will think badly of the woman. They don’t think she must have left her home because she had to.” Hasina, in Kabul, relayed the similar conclusions reached by her brothers. “They say that God doesn’t want any of us taken to the authorities, as it would bring shame on our family. If one of us were taken for not wearing hijab, people would not believe that was the actual reason. They’d think there were other, negative reasons for the arrest.” Hasina was one of our interviewees who described how her family was now policing her:

*The men in our family are ... deeply uneasy, especially when the women go outside. They’re constantly worried and always advise us to wear hijab, never to go out alone, and to always have a mahram accompany us. If there’s no man at home, they insist that at least two women go together to the market – never alone.*

When Hasina does leave the house, her brother sometimes accompanies her as a mahram, and at other times, it is her nephew, even though “he is a child, not even 15 years old.” In such ways, the law infantilises women. Hasina used to travel to different provinces for work, but now, her family does not permit her to go outside the house without a male family member – her brother or a 14-year-old nephew – or at least another woman. Safira, the factory owner in Mazar, has to rely on her husband or son when she wants to leave the house.

**Samira works as a teacher and midwife, with experience in both Bamyan and Kabul.** She had changed careers after the Emirate stopped her progressing to her fifth year of training to be a doctor by banning women from higher education. She said her religious family is happy with some aspects of the law to some extent. They strongly disagree with the ban on girls’ education beyond primary and restrictions on women working outside the home, but do support the Emirate’s order requiring women to wear ‘sharia hijab’. Safira complies with the law both because she fears arrest and because she must obey her family:

*Under the Republic, I could freely go everywhere without a mahram. I was almost like a man in terms of freedom. Now, we can’t do that. I can’t go anywhere without my parents’ permission. My parents check whether my clothing complies with the Taliban dress code before allowing me to leave the house. They tell me*

*the Taliban might take me away if I don’t obey their rules. ... This is affecting my spirit. Although we observe the hijab, dressing according to the vice and virtue law, it’s frustrating and suffocating.*



Families sail paddle boats at the popular tourist site of Band-e Amir in Bamyan province. Women having difficulty getting pregnant have traditionally come to bathe in the water, believing it to be blessed. On 26 August 2023, the Emirate banned women from visiting the park, citing hijab violations.

Photo: Bulent Kilic/AFP, 4 October 2021

However, the author also heard from men who fully supported their female relatives defying the law by dressing ‘normally’ and going out unaccompanied, as they had always done. One man in Kabul, for example, proudly looked on as his wife described how she had responded to a mawlawi in a government office after he complained that she was looking him in the eye: “‘You’re looking *me* in the eye!’ I told him. ‘You should be more modest.’” Both agreed, however, that it was more difficult for younger women and that their families might feel more protective and therefore be stricter.

Pari, the midwife, for example, who was stopped by Amr bil-Maruf for not covering her face, said her family now insists she observe ‘full hijab’ whenever she goes out, but even then, they do not want her to go to the market without a male family

member, or at least her mother. She also said that, whenever she leaves the house, “my mother worries until I return home. She becomes anxious and concerned. Even on days when I go to the hospital, she calls me several times to check how I’m doing.” That may seem like an overreaction, but as the next section shows, being at work, even in a sex-segregated environment, may not be a protection from the morality police.

## Amr bil-Maruf in the workplace

Pari said enforcers come to her hospital “two or three times a day” to make sure staff are segregated and that women are wearing full hijab, including covering their faces. If they do not comply, she said, they will be fired:

*We are, thank God, Muslims, and we’ve always observed hijab, but we didn’t wear long cloaks or Arabic-style hijab. ... I’ve been working in hospitals for nearly eight years now and it’s impractical for [medical staff] to wear full hijab or traditional long dresses because [our] work environment differs from other workplaces.*

Samira, the teacher and midwife, spoke about her experiences teaching in educational centres in Bamyan and Kabul:

*In Bamyan, every Thursday, [the enforcers] would visit the centre to inspect the girls’ hijab. They’d train us on how to advise our students to wear niqab and hijab properly and how to comply with the Amr bil-Maruf law, instructing us to tell our students to wear long abayas, black scarves, black shoes, black socks, and, if possible, black gloves, and stressing that they should avoid white shoes and scarves.*

Samira also described a raid on the Kabul educational institute where she taught:

*Around 15 enforcers arrived in half a dozen vehicles. Suddenly, our institute’s guard started calling out to the girls to wear their scarves properly, warning them that the enforcers would arrest anyone who didn’t comply. ... There were 85 students in my class. When the enforcers arrived, they said our hijabs looked acceptable, but then they also stood near the gate, checking the girls’ hijabs again, [scrutinising them] from head to toe. I witnessed girls fainting and some even hiding in the toilets out of fear. They didn’t have a single female enforcer with them. It was all men who checked our clothing. It was such a terrifying scene because they came in such force and with so many vehicles.*

Hasina described how no female member of staff had ever come to work without hijab at her NGO in Kabul, neither during the Republic nor the Emirate, and also how, following the takeover, her NGO had segregated the workplace as was required by law. They had worked happily for a year with no trouble, she said. Then, even before the vice and virtue law was passed, things changed:

*Amr bil-Maruf started coming to the office at all hours, controlling how women entered the workplace and whether they were interacting with men. Our office had very strict policies – even the security guards on our gate were women. Yet, we still faced warnings and confrontations with the enforcers. They'd come on various pretexts and criticise us.*

In a recent AAN report on maternal mortality, one of the interviewees, the head midwife of a clinic in Takhar province, said that Amr bil-Maruf “sometimes enter delivery rooms during childbirth, forcing us to leave while they ‘inspect’ the room, claiming we might be hiding our corruption.” On one occasion, she said, “They were physically present in the delivery room when we were delivering a baby.”<sup>13</sup>

The author met just one person who had managed to keep Amr bil-Maruf out of the women’s side of the clinic he was responsible for in Kabul. He had persuaded the enforcers that it was not decent for them to enter and that nothing untoward would ever be allowed to take place in his clinic. This was an exceptional example of successful negotiation by an older Pashtun man of some social standing – he had been a mujahed in the 1980s. Other interviewees said it was easier for men who spoke the ‘same language’ as the Taliban to negotiate or argue their way out of difficult situations. What they meant by that was not only speaking Pashto, but also expressing themselves in a way that put them on the same level as the average Talib, ie a mixture of Islamic-principled references, jihad-inspired values and notions stemming from rural Afghan, especially Pashtun, conservatism on social and gender issues. Mostly, however, Afghans are unable to stop enforcers looking at women and entering what should be women-only spaces. This paradox, inherent in the Amr bil-Maruf system, emerged powerfully from our interviews: the very men who enforce sex-segregation on the population are also some of the few men legally empowered by the Emirate to look at and speak to unrelated women, when the law explicitly says this is illegal.

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<sup>13</sup> Jelena Bjelica and the AAN Team, [Is maternal mortality on the rise in Afghanistan? No official data, but much cause for concern](#), 28 September 2025.

The three enforcers we interviewed (more from whom below) all said they were uncomfortable dealing with unrelated women and would certainly rather not talk to them. Yet some enforcers will happily go into female-only classrooms or remonstrate with unrelated women on the street, and while unaccompanied women may be banned from accessing healthcare, enforcers can apparently visit women-only areas of clinics and hospitals, even at deeply intimate moments.

The law gives male enforcers the power and opportunity to breach spaces that are generally considered — by culture and practice — to be exclusively female, as well as public spaces — streets, markets and shops — in which women could expect to be respected. It has left women vulnerable to abuse by men who act with all the authority of the state. Moreover, as our interviewees have noted, if a woman complains, she is likely to be blamed.

## MEN’S EXPERIENCES OF THE LAW

We conducted in-depth interviews with three male members of the public for this research.<sup>14</sup> Parvez, the teacher in Ghazni, when asked about the impact of the law, referred especially to women’s suffering. “Certainly, the law has affected not only my life, but the lives of all the people in the province. It’s caused restrictions for everybody, but particularly for women. They can’t go out freely due to fear of the enforcers of the vice and virtue department.” He went on to describe how his wife, herself a teacher, is now forced to sit at home because her old job, teaching at a high school, no longer exists: “My wife can’t work anymore. ... She can’t go out without a mahram and can’t dress how she wants, but must wear black clothes, a niqab and even gloves. This is what we don’t like.”

As for himself, Parvez had lost one job over clothes and beard violations, but had got another. He was still very young, he said, and liked to wear the latest fashions, but has had to conform to the demands of Amr bil-Maruf. They had admonished him twice at his school over his beard and ‘foreign’ haircut. “If we don’t obey,” he said, “they’ll certainly imprison us.” Both teachers and pupils now had to wear caps or turbans. One boy had come close to being expelled on the orders of Amr bil-Maruf because he was wearing jeans. Only the principal’s pleading had saved him.

In **Kandahar, businessman Ahmad Khan** also described the changes to his family’s life since the new law was passed:

*This law has robbed us of our freedom as a family to go to restaurants and eat a meal, or to an ice cream parlour. Women can’t go to restaurants even with a mahram. I can’t take my female family members with me on a picnic. I can’t even travel with my wife in my own car with my heart at ease.*

He said his age, his beard and clothes – similar to the enforcers – as well as where he lived – an upmarket part of Kandahar, “a civilised township” – gave him a lot of protection from the enforcers. However, he had heard that they dealt harshly with

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<sup>14</sup> Martine van Bijlert and the AAN Team also carried out research into how Afghan men, in particular, viewed Emirate laws restricting women: [In Pursuit of Virtue: Men’s views on the Islamic Emirate’s restrictions on women](#), 26 January 2025.

those living in a poorer area of the city. He also said they did stop and question the young men in his family if they were driving with female family members. “My sons and I no longer go out with our wives unless it’s necessary,” he said. “We’re afraid they’ll beat us or threaten us in front of our wives.”



Men playing chess in a Kabul cafe. On the same day, the Emirate banned chess until further notice, citing concerns that it leads to gambling, which is illegal.

Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 11 May 2025

In Kabul, under the Emirate as under the Republic, most Afghan men have beards, but many (most?) do not grow them to the length required by law – at least a fistful-long. One man, in conversation, said he grew his beard if he knew he would be needing something from a government office, and also wore *pirhan tomban* on the day. Men working in government also had to follow the authorities’ dress code or risk being sacked, the only exceptions being certain men deemed technically valuable, whom it would be a loss to sack for shaving or wearing trousers. For other men, he stressed, it was important to resist the edicts.

There was also a recognition by some of our female interviewees of the pressure the Emirate has put on Afghan men, for example, Hasina, the NGO worker living in Kabul:

*Like women, they've suffered greatly. Many have lost their jobs and are struggling with various hardships. Since all family responsibilities now fall on men, they must work to support their households, but opportunities are scarce, and the pressure is overwhelming. The Taliban's restrictions haven't only imprisoned women but also crushed men under the weight of impossible burdens.*

## AMR BIL-MARUF PUNISHMENTS AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

Among the interviewees, the one who had been most severely punished was **Rashid Khan, a barber in Qalat city, provincial capital of Zabul**. He had been arrested five times for trimming beards. Each time, he said, he and other barbers would be held for three days. On the fourth occasion, tribal elders came and assured the enforcers they would not repeat their offence and they were freed. On the fifth occasion, he spent 15 days in jail. He was again let out following the guarantees of tribal elders and friends of his brothers and relatives, but was warned that any future breach of the law would result in a fine and six months in jail. Since then, he said, “I’ve been trying not to violate the law. I don’t shave or trim any customers’ beards, even though they insist for hours that I do so.” His business, he said, is down by two-thirds. He has laid off two barbers and struggles to cover his household’s expenses, the rent and the wages of the one remaining barber who still works in his shop.

Some of our interviewees described being admonished or threatened by Amr bil-Maruf. While none apart from Rashid had been detained, one of Ahmad Khan’s sons had been arrested for getting his beard trimmed. Moreover, said Pari, as women and girls are deprived of work, education and leisure outside the home, “there is little difference between a woman in this situation and a prisoner.”

All the women, except Zarghuna in Loya Paktia, knew of other women who had been detained, or mentioned seeing arrests on television or through social media.<sup>15</sup> Hasina in Kabul, for example, described how her neighbour had been arrested by two women “dressed entirely in black” because of her clothing. The neighbour had been driven, along with three other women, to the district police station, where her family had had to go to give a guarantee that she would “observe complete hijab” in the future. Samira, the midwife and teacher described how, when she was coming out of the Kabul hospital where she works, on Mother’s Day, she saw Amr bil-Maruf

<sup>15</sup> The 5 September 2025 UN Secretary-General report, [The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security](#), said that in July 2025, “in various areas of the city of Kabul, de facto police and inspectors of the de facto Department for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice arrested at least 60 women and girls for allegedly violating hijab instructions.”

vehicles at the entrance to each alley, “checking on what girls were wearing.” She witnessed two girls being arrested, she said, and was left feeling “terrified.”



A man walks past a barber shop with defaced images of men in Kabul's Koch-e Sang Tarashi neighbourhood. 'Western haircuts' and shortened or shaved beards are now illegal for men.  
Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 31 January 2024

Pari, the other midwife in Kabul, had not herself seen arrests, but said: “The videos of women being detained that we see in the media make me very anxious, and I feel like it’s my turn next – that they’ll arrest me. In a way, I even feel guilty, as if I might make a mistake and they’ll detain me.” She said life had become much worse since the new law came into force because the idea of Amr bil-Ma’ruf “putting a young girl in a car in broad daylight and taking her to a mosque or stopping her on a public road and interrogating her is a horror in itself.” The mere threat of arrest is enough to control, or at least influence, how women dress and behave and the risk of a ‘bad encounter’ with Amr bil-Maruf goes up to and includes physical violence. Pari relayed what had happened to a colleague:

*She was slapped so hard in front of the hospital that I'll never forget it. She'd just gone outside. She was from the north. They insulted her first, saying, "This isn't abroad – this is Afghanistan, an Islamic country," and then questioned why she was walking outside without a hijab. They didn't let her speak. Instead, they forcefully pulled her scarf away, exposing her head, and then slapped her hard in front of everyone.*

Human rights and media reporting have provided examples of even more severe punishments for breaking Taliban codes. An investigation by [Hasht-e Sobh](#), published on 17 August 2024, used data from the Supreme Court and its own daily reporting to look into the Emirate's use of flogging since the takeover. The crimes of those publicly flogged included some violations of the vice and virtue law or other 'moral crimes', such as failure to comply with the Taliban's dress code, for women, travelling without a mahram, fleeing from home (classified as a crime for women and girls under both the Emirate and the Republic), speaking on the phone to a non-mahram individual, engaging in anal sex and drinking alcohol. The newspaper did not specify if individuals had been arrested by Amr bil-Maruf or another arm of the state, but the moral aspects of the crimes were evident. A [Zan Times/The Guardian report](#) from 6 May 2025 about women being flogged included an interview with a woman who headed her household and worked as a tailor, who described Amr bil-Maruf detaining her for four days (despite her seven children being left motherless at home) for renting a sewing machine from an unrelated man, and a second arrest for being caught sitting in a store while her phone charged, without a mahram or face covering, after which she was publicly flogged. The worst part of the punishment, she said, was the humiliation: ““When I was released, even my closest friends started treating me differently. They called me names and spoke about me with such disgust because they'd been told lies about what happened.””

## GOING BEYOND THE LAW

Enforcers, according to our interviews, appear to routinely go beyond even the tight restrictions of the current law. Safira in Mazar, for example, was told she must wear a burqa and several women were told to wear gloves. Yet the Emirate’s order on women’s clothing, issued in May 2022 (see footnote 6), says nothing about gloves, saying only that hijab is “any clothing covering the body … providing it is not so thin the body could be visible through it, nor so tight as to highlight body parts.” It specifies that ‘sharia hijab’ can be *either* a burqa *or* (as worn by Safira) “customary black clothing and shawl,” with a face covering that may reveal the eyes.

Most of our interviewees had also been questioned about mahrams – if they were a woman, whether they were outside without one, or, if they were a man, whether they were a mahram to the woman they were with. Yet, a December 2021 order specified that a mahram is only obligatory if a woman is travelling more than 72 kilometres ([BBC](#)). The August 2024 vice and virtue law and the May 2022 sharia hijab law both also advise that, in the words of the hijab order: “Not venturing out without cause is the first and best type of adherence to sharia hijab.” Yet, both also acknowledge that women may have to go outside. Neither specifies the need for a man to chaperone her ([AAN reporting](#)).

The Amr bil-Maruf law says that men must cover their bodies from navel to knee (including the knee itself) and that their clothing must be loose, but says nothing about having to wear a cap or turban. Nor does it specify pirhan tomban. Yet, Aisha in Herat was not the only interviewee to report that “To be able to live here, our men must... wear caps and turbans. ... They have one option and that is wearing traditional Afghan clothes.”

## REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

The interviews revealed clear differences in how Amr bil-Maruf behaved – and how people responded – in different locations. Samira said that, on the whole, Amr bil-Maruf enforcers behaved more respectfully towards the people in Bamyan than those in Kabul. Also, unlike Samira’s educational centres or Parvez’s boys’ school in Ghazni, Zarghuna’s school in Loya Paktia had never been visited by enforcers. Indeed, as she described earlier, she and her teachers are not bothered by Amr bil-Maruf when they walked to school without mahrams. Since the re-establishment of the Emirate, Zarghuna said, she had never seen any woman being stopped or spoken to in the market by Amr bil-Maruf, and although all women wear full hijab, not all are accompanied by men. That it was perceived as ‘legal’ for families in her area to visit recreational areas was not the case elsewhere. Other interviewees said it was no longer possible for families to picnic in Kandahar, or for those from Kabul to visit the nearby green areas of Qargha and Paghman or for those from Mazar to go to Sholgara district. Most of the interviewees described being stopped and questioned at checkpoints when travelling out of town, but Zarghuna said that, when travelling from Loya Paktia to Kabul and back, Amr bil-Maruf had never stopped the car. She had also seen women on that road travelling without a mahram. A woman alone would not be allowed to board a bus or a shared taxi to a distant place, she said, but they could travel in a group of three or four.

Having travelled to Kabul, she could also comment on how different things were there, including the many more enforcers than in her home city. “I believe,” she said, “they act more strictly in Kabul than in [my province] because Kabul is home to diverse people with different cultures, and women move around more freely compared to the rural areas. Their style of clothing is also different – many girls in Kabul wear Punjabi-style clothes<sup>16</sup> or do not observe hijab, which is why the enforcers are stricter in Kabul than in the provinces. Perhaps [the enforcers’] behaviour towards people also differs.”

Particularly in some big cities, women – and men – have been used to greater freedom. There has been greater diversity of people, clothing and behaviour, and

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Punjabi-style’ here refers to shalwar kameez, worn with a headscarf, typical clothing for warmer weather.

more anonymity than in villages, towns and smaller cities, where everyone knows everyone else. That freedom and diversity certainly linger in the capital, with its large and unruly population, and despite the efforts of Amr bil-Maruf. The enforcers push, and people push back, men by not growing their beards or by wearing trousers and women also by not obeying the dress codes and ‘talking back’ to the enforcers. The situation in Kabul was a source of astonishment for interviewees from more conservative provinces, not even comparable to that in Kandahar, said Ahmad Khan:

*Women can go out without mahrams! They can go to restaurants to eat. I've seen the computer operators in the bazaar transfer films, videos and music to people's memory cards. ... I've seen women asking those computer guys to transfer films or songs to their memory cards. But in Kandahar, these kinds of computer operators have already closed their businesses – because the enforcers don't allow them to work.*

Rashid Khan, the Zabuli barber, was similarly amazed: “I've travelled to Kabul. There's a huge difference, a difference I just couldn't comprehend. I saw the barbers in Kabul were shaving customers' beards, but no one was asking them about it. I couldn't believe that there was Amr bil-Maruf in the city.” Unlike Loya Paktia, women in Kabul can still go to public hospitals by themselves and be admitted; no one challenges them for not having a mahram.

From the interviews, it also appears that, where Amr bil-Maruf rules on dress and behaviour are normal, there is less friction between enforcers and the populace. Rashid Khan in ultra-conservative Zabul, for example, when asked about the impact of the law on the women in his family, said it had “not affected” their freedom. They could “still go to the wedding parties of neighbours and relatives as in the past,” he said, explaining that these were “held in homes, not in wedding halls, which have been banned in other provinces,”<sup>17</sup> but said that “there have never been parks or other entertainment places in Qalat city that women can go to.” However, Zarghuna's experience also points, possibly, to greater leeway in her ‘traditional’ province, especially for behaviour that has always been deemed acceptable, such as female teachers walking to work unchaperoned. Moreover, the push-back from people is not confined to liberal Kabul. Rashid Khan in Zabul reported being

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<sup>17</sup> Wedding halls are not banned in all provinces, although they may be restricted in terms of playing music and what women can wear.

pestered by customers who wanted their beards trimmed, and Ahmad Khan’s sons in Kandahar had been arrested for getting their beards shortened.

Some of the interviewees also thought there was an ethnic dimension to how Amr bil-Maruf treated people. Aisha in Herat, for example, said: “They behave inhumanely towards Persian speakers, but they respect Pashtuns and their own ethnic group.” The counterexample to this would be Ahmad Khan’s sons in Kandahar, who were questioned by Amr bil-Maruf when driving with their wives, although their father, being older and seen as more ‘respectable’, had never been stopped when driving with their mother.

Beyond regional differences, the enforcement of vice and virtue rules appears to move in waves – periods of intensified clamping down on rulebreakers in a given location followed by an easing of pressure. These shifts can occur after a change of governor or a public backlash, or for some other unfathomable reason: people were not always sure what sparked Amr bil-Maruf to crack down – or relent.

Sometimes, though, the triggers are clearer. In Herat, for example, as Médecins Sans Frontières [reported](#) on 9 November: “Since 5 November, local restrictions have been implemented in Herat province requiring female patients, caretakers, and staff to wear a burqa to enter public health facilities, including at Herat Regional Hospital,” where MSF supports paediatric services. MSF noted that it had “already observed a 28% drop in admissions of patients whose conditions are urgent.” According to a source in the city interviewed in early December, the order was actually broader than just public hospitals and, in fact, applied to all government offices and had come from the governor (see also [Atlas Press](#)). Significantly, the source also said that, following widespread criticism on social media, the Department of Amr bil-Maruf had met and decided that actually women need only wear a headscarf and a face mask or niqab to be admitted.

## THE ENFORCERS’ EXPERIENCE OF THE LAW

Our interviews with the three enforcers also shed some light on how they perceive diversity as ‘wrongdoing’ and believe it needs to be corrected. None of them are from Kabul, but all are now working there and find it an alien and alienating city. Their interviews form the basis of this section of the report.

We spoke to three enforcers, from Paktia, Wardak and Panjshir. One of them viewed joining Amr bil-Maruf as a calling, a religious vocation. The other two appeared to be motivated by getting a job and a (relatively good) salary. All are now working in the Afghan capital, but all three also have experience working in their own or other largely rural provinces.

### Getting a job, training and duties

The first enforcer interviewed was **Mullah Hamdullah from Paktia**. He got his job after an introduction by a friend who had become a director at the vice and virtue ministry and had a good relationship with the minister dating back to the “time of jihad.” Hamdullah was aware “that the salaries for Amr bil-Maruf were higher than those in other similar administrative positions within the government.” After some “administrative procedures,” lasting about two months, he was appointed.

Our second enforcer, **Mawlawi Niamatullah from Wardak**, said that when the Emirate announced an increase in the ministry’s district *tashkil* (authorised workforce), he applied for a job. He passed a written test, gave a successful sermon and was appointed. He later lost that position due to job cuts, but contacted a friend at the ministry and was approved for a vacancy in Kabul, where he now works.

The third enforcer, **Qari Abdul Aziz, is from Panjshir** and said he had always had a strong passion for *da’wa* (inviting Muslims to strengthen their faith or non-believers to embrace Islam) and, as a sharia graduate, the job of an Amr bil-Maruf enforcer was, for him, a calling:<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Da’wa is an Arabic word. The Emirate’s Directorates of Invitation and Guidance, found within each ministry, use the Persian/Pashto version, *dawat*.

*At first, when the ministry was established and began operations in my district, almost anyone with the right connections could join. Some people even submitted fake school certificates to secure positions. However, after the ministry’s laws and regulations were formalised, significant changes were made to the tashkil. According to the new criteria, an enforcer must now have higher education or at least a completed secondary school diploma [14th grade].*

Abdul Aziz said the ministry dismissed the enforcers who had submitted invalid or fake documents and replaced them with “qualified individuals who had graduated from recognised religious schools and had experience in Islamic da’wa.” He also described some of the personal qualities enforcers must possess to be successful – sincerity, knowledge, communication skills, patience, good manners and resilience. Before the law was passed a year ago, he said they had had real problems with personnel, not those with “experience in da’wa,” but those who “had got their jobs through *waseta* (connections)”:

*They acted as if they could do anything, even though the duty of an enforcer is only to invite [people to virtue and away from vice]. Similarly, he should gradually prevent people from evil, but not by beating them. Everyone then acted as oppressive policemen, playing the role of both judge and prosecutor. After the law was enacted and changes were made to the tashkil, those who’d caused problems for the people and were illiterate were removed. These were the people who’d truly created a gap between the people and the government and had no idea what the duty of an enforcer actually was.*

All three men described getting only a little training. Hamdullah from Paktia had had a week of one-hour sessions “on how to deliver effective sermons to the public,” as well as other sessions on “how to act when encountering *munkarat* [vice],” although he said it “wasn’t the same kind of intensive training that security forces like the police go through.” Niamatullah said they were given no special training, but that he had attended three two-day workshops on the new law and how to implement it and two other workshops on how to speak to people in mosques and at public ceremonies. After the law was enacted, said Abdul Aziz, they had attended a “capacity-building workshop” in the Valley as well as a three-day workshop in Kabul, which was attended by enforcers from various provinces, where the law was explained, including how they should interact with the public.

The three men also described what they dealt with in Kabul. “The most common problems among men,” said Niamatullah, “is the use of drugs like tablet K.<sup>19</sup> The other issue is flirting with girls. Among women, the major problems are not wearing proper hijab and again, flirting with men.”

Abdul Aziz went through a long list of types of wrongdoing that they dealt with: expressing anti-Islamic slogans or celebrating days observed by the “idolators” [*mushrikin*], such as Christmas and Nawruz, shaving or trimming one’s beard, abandoning “religious obligations [such as congregational prayers] without a valid excuse,” not fasting during Ramadan, adultery, homosexuality, *bacha bazi*,<sup>20</sup> gambling and other immoral acts, women not observing hijab, drinking alcohol, playing music loud enough to be heard outside, gambling, playing dice and smoking hookahs, and “having inappropriate or anti-Islamic films” on “electronic objects such as computers, mobile phones, satellite dishes and televisions.” In the market, he said, they had to make sure no one was taking interest, bribing or stealing, and their duty would then be to bring the perpetrator to justice in cooperation with the police.

It is the enforcer’s duty, Abdul Aziz said, to tell people that music, such as at weddings, is banned and should not be heard outside a person’s home. However, they are never allowed to enter private homes (for any reason) or go into the women’s section of a wedding hall or hotel. They can only “deal with wedding halls, hotels and sports venues during prayer times to ensure prayers are being performed [presumably by men].” He said they are also not allowed to break mobile phones, but could insist that offensive material is deleted.

Abdul Aziz stressed that, for most recalcitrant wrongdoers, the response escalated with each offence. Only at the fourth offence would they speak harshly or slap the offender, and at the fifth stage, refer them to the judicial authorities. If a woman failed to wear ‘Islamic hijab’, her family would be summoned by the security forces and male relatives would have to guarantee her good behaviour. He said they also had the authority to detain a person in their office for up to three days.

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<sup>19</sup> Tablet K is a cocktail of methamphetamine, heroin and MDMA/Ecstasy; its name derives from the Russian word for a pill, *tabletka*.

<sup>20</sup> *Bacha bazi* (literally, ‘boy play’) is the practice of an adult man enslaving and exploiting a boy for sexual abuse, typically also forcing him to wear female clothing.

In contrast with what our interviewees with the general public reported, Abdul Aziz said that male enforcers are not allowed to arrest women, so they cooperate with policewomen (though our research and other reports suggest this is rarely the case).

## Enforcing ‘morality’ in the capital

All three enforcers were working in Kabul and all found it an alienating environment. Operating there, Abdul Aziz said, was far more difficult than in Panjshir, where he and his colleagues were familiar with the people and understood their culture:

*It was easier to do da’wa with women [in Panjshir] than in Kabul because I didn’t have to face them. If a woman in the area was without hijab, I’d call her family, her father and brother, and the head of the village and tell them she shouldn’t go outside without hijab. Our job was easy there because I [only] had to face men and we knew the people. I could convey my message to women through her family.*

*In Kabul, there are many women without hijab, but we can’t find their families. Nor do we have the courage to speak directly to a woman who isn’t related to us. However, we try to guide them through various means. We make them understand, so they realise they should observe hijab. This is extremely difficult because we can’t stop an unrelated woman and have a conversation with her.*

He said it was good to seek help from the local elders, the *wakil-e guzar* (head of the neighbourhood) or the imam from the mosque or they informed the “residents of the area” that women must observe “full sharia-compliant hijab.” However, in the markets, he said they encountered all kinds of people, and sometimes a woman, politely asked to observe hijab or maintain her distance from men, would “respond rudely, and we’re forced to remain silent and leave the area because we do not use force – we only speak to them gently.”

All three enforcers felt disrespected, even wary of the people they had to deal with, especially women, as Mawlawi Niamatullah explained:

*Women in Kabul are not like women. They’re actually men, or even more than men. When we ask them why they don’t wear hijab, they argue and behave very rudely. I personally try to avoid them as much as possible and tell others to deal with them.*

*For me, it's a bit difficult [working in Kabul] as we're concerned with people doing wrong. It's full of challenges and when you see people doing so many filthy things, it sometimes gets really tough. We see unimaginable cases. So that's hard. Sometimes we have to use strict methods. We have to arrest women and young men. That's not a pleasant thing.*



Virtue and vice enforcers inspect vehicles at a checkpoint on the outskirts of Herat.

Photo by Mohsen Karimi/AFP, 4 October 2024

He said his previous posting, to Logar, was far easier. There was wrongdoing there as well, but not as much as in Kabul and people in Logar had “some sense of shame.” They would listen, cooperate and stop any wrongdoing after one warning. In Kabul, on the other hand, “the people don’t care about shame and do whatever they want. … People neither listen to us, nor respect us.” For him, the dislike of the people towards Amr bil-Maruf was just human nature:

*Even children don't like their fathers when they say, “Don't do this” or “Don't do that,” even though a father only wants to keep his child from going down the wrong path. But still, they dislike him. People want to follow their desires and when you stop them, even for their own good, they get offended.*

Abdul Aziz had a more balanced view of the populace:

*The people’s attitude towards the enforcers isn’t very good; they view them quite negatively because they believe we disrupt their lives and that makes them bitter. But there are also good people in the community who regard us positively and treat us as the ulema. They’re satisfied with our efforts. But the majority of the youth are dissatisfied with our work.*

He said they tried to treat everyone equally, not compromising with anyone and always being gentle – “because we’re religious scholars.” He said that, maybe, some enforcers sometimes dealt harshly with people, but he and his colleagues were always gentle. Altogether, he loved his job:

*During my studies, I was interested in becoming a preacher and an ‘inviter’ to Islam worldwide. I’m also very happy that I can invite people to Islam in this way, and during the two years that I’ve been working in this field, I’m satisfied with my job. Because the job of ‘enjoining good’ is a sacred job that is obligatory for every Muslim. Preventing evil isn’t only the job of a religious scholar. It’s the job of every Muslim to prevent evil in his society. This job isn’t just for a Talib or a mullah; it’s the job of every Muslim.*

Hamdullah from Paktia, however, believes greater harshness is needed.

*It’s a densely populated city, with people from across Afghanistan and the amount of munkarat [wrongdoing] is high. Immorality is widespread. Hijab is a major issue, as many women don’t observe it. Many young people shave their beards, adopt Western-style haircuts and engage in drug use and other harmful behaviour. Extra-marital relationships are also a serious concern.*

He said they were instructed to always deal with people respectfully and to try to persuade them in “a kind, convincing manner to abandon their wrongdoing,” as sharia instructs. This approach, he said, was failing:

*For the past four years, we’ve taken a soft approach, but we haven’t seen much change. To be honest, there’s very little difference compared to the time of the previous government. Markets are still full of women, men are clean-shaven and copying female styles, and hijab is barely observed. I believe this is the result of our soft approach. We just say: “Do this!” and “Don’t do that!” and that’s all. But it’s not enough. When we try to enforce something, or use a stricter method, people complain, and then we get questioned by the authorities about our actions.*

## HOW THE ENFORCERS ARE VIEWED

There was a clear mismatch in how the three enforcers saw their role and how almost all our interviewees viewed them. None of the three enforcers described their job as aimed at striking fear into the hearts of people to force a change in their behaviour – although Hamdullah would like to do so. Yet, all of those subject to the enforcers, except Zarghuna in Loya Paktia, expressed fear of Amr bil-Maruf. For example, Hasina in Kabul said:

*These morality enforcers undermine religion and present a distorted and inhumane image of Islam, which is unacceptable to me because our Islam is not defined in the way the Taliban portray it. They implement everything according to their own desires, not based on sharia or Afghan culture... Essentially, they impose their own interpretation of Islam on people. Whatever they want, they force people to accept – sometimes by coercion, sometimes by persuasion, but in my opinion, Islam is not what they claim it to be; Islam is not this harsh. After all, we're all Muslims – whether they enforce it or not. Most women observe hijab. However, it must be said that, among them, there are good and bad. Some speak to people with kindness and gentle words, while others behave harshly, especially when dealing with what they consider a 'crime' – although we may not call it a crime. In our view, a crime is when someone commits a shameful act that harms society, not when a bit of hair is visible.*

Aisha in Herat described the enforcers as “all the same, very cruel, at least, that’s the case in Herat. I haven’t seen any differences among them. Whenever I go out – always out of necessity – I see them in different parts of the city and all of them look frightening.” Overall, she feels they do not consider women to be “human beings.” She also believes the system is damaging her religion:

*The enforcement of this law has had severe psychological consequences, particularly for women, who have suffered under its un-Islamic implementation. Many have grown disillusioned with Islam as a result. I mean, some people even wish they weren't born Muslim. However, I know it's not a problem with Islam, but the problem of fundamentalists having a different interpretation of the*

*Islamic laws. Their interpretations cause people to stray away from Islam and Islamic beliefs.*

Zarghuna from Loya Paktia’s more favourable view of Amr bil-Maruf was tempered by disapproval of other aspects of Emirate rule:

*I trust the enforcers because they seem to be good people. Most of them are religious scholars and preach the truth. No one’s been bothered by them yet. The only thing that bothers me and most people is the restriction on girls’ education. Hijab is a religious requirement, whether the Taliban say it or not. We are, thank God, Muslims, and we respect the hijab.*

## HOW AMR BIL-MARUF FITS INTO PEOPLE’S SENSE OF SECURITY AND THEIR WIDER CONCERNS

On the fourth anniversary of the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate, Amir Hibatullah wrote to the nation that since the end of the occupation, the country had gained a holy Islamic system, that security was now ensured throughout the country and that – because of the shining light of Islamic law – people had been saved from corruption, oppression, drugs, theft, robbery and looting (see his message [here](#)). This assertion dovetailed with one of the questions we had asked the non-enforcer interviewees: Did they feel their lives and safety had improved since the vice and virtue law had come into force? Their responses were interesting. For example, Zarghuna, the school principal in Loya Paktia, said:

*Overall, public security has improved. There’s no war. The fears that existed a few years ago have ended. People are free of suicide bombings and wherever we travel, security is better. However, we lack psychological security. Peace of mind is, in fact, the most important component of security. When the soul is unsettled and facing an uncertain future, this cannot be called security. So, it can be said that physical security is good, but the psychological security for me and most women in this province isn’t good.*

Parvez, the teacher in Ghazni, expressed similar sentiments:

*In a situation where neither individual freedom nor social freedom exists, and both men and women face numerous restrictions in society, security doesn’t improve. It gets worse. Women have to go out with a mahram, but if by chance the man of the family isn’t at home and the woman has to go out, due to necessity, the enforcers might stop her, ask where she’s going and why she isn’t with her mahram. They might imprison her. That is why people don’t feel safe*

Hasina in Kabul, said, “If a woman cannot go out with peace of mind, it cannot be called security, because emotional security is just as important as physical security. In my opinion, this law has not led to an improvement. Rather, it creates despair and fear for both me and my family members.” She also had wider concerns for herself, her former colleagues and the beneficiaries of her NGO:

*Many of the women I worked with were breadwinners and carried the responsibility of their households, but they lost their jobs. Only a limited number of us have been kept on by the office and most now work from home. This restriction has severely limited our work, halting the assistance we provide to people and the areas we visit to check on their well-being. For now, I’m working from home, but I live in constant fear, always worried that this last opportunity might also be taken away from me.*

On the particular subject of hijab, it is, according to the May 2022 women’s clothing law, designed to “protect” women and make them “dignified and honourable.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, said Pari, even in this, the Emirate was failing. “Nowadays,” she said, “even what the Taliban refers to as hijab does not guarantee safety, as I have heard from women who have been harassed by Amr bil-Maruf enforcers despite wearing hijab.” She compared the situation to that under the Republic, where “a person had independence and could move freely and wear whatever they liked.” This was part of Pari’s response to a question on how the new law had affected her. Like most of our interviewees, her answer pulled together many other elements of the Emirate’s system, along with the struggle to survive in an impoverished economy. All her difficulties were bound up together. So, in the same breath as describing her experiences under the virtue and vice law, she also spoke about the ban on education for girls beyond primary (affecting her sister, who had been in 10<sup>th</sup> grade), job losses (her mother and father), salary reductions (both her and her brother), the rise of patriarchal beliefs, the curtailing of freedoms, rent rises and the constant, Herculean effort to make ends meet.

Hasina also answered a question about the impact of the law very broadly, how forcing women from many areas of paid work, in concert with increased social restrictions, had left them to “grapple with livelihood crises, psychological pressure, and social isolation.” Men, although less heavily restricted by the law, she said, were also now forced to bear the brunt of families’ economic problems, because women were so restricted in what paid work they could do.

For Zarghuna, it was the fact that her husband was one of many who have had to travel to other countries to find work to support his family that, together with the mahram rules, had made life so difficult. She also mourned the progress that had

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<sup>21</sup> The benefits of ‘sharia hijab’, according to the May 2022 order, include that it makes women “safe from being led astray or committing sins, protects them from the evil and corruption of those who are [morally] corrupt [and means] they cannot easily fall prey to the intrigue of immoral circles.” (see footnote 6).

been made by her society, by girls and women in her traditional province, that was now lost. “As a mother and the principal of a school,” she said, “I feel the pain and struggles of all women deeply. ... I witness, first-hand, the dreams and aspirations of girls who longed to pursue higher education and contribute to society, only to see those hopes crushed. The closure of school gates for girls beyond the sixth grade has left profound and devastating psychological scars on these young female pupils.”



Girls in high spirits walk down a severely damaged street in Kabul after the fall of the first Islamic Emirate on the first day of the school year. Girls' schools had been reopened.

Photo: Michael Kappeler/DDP via AFP, 23 March 2002

## CONCLUSION

In February 2023, we published a [report](#) about five Taliban who had come to live and work in Kabul. What was surprising was how their view of the city and its people changed once they lived there. They had understood it to have been degraded by Western ways, but found that men were still going to the mosque and “unlike villages where a lot of people go to the mosque to impress others,” said one, “people in Kabul go there just for the sake of Allah.” You could see, he also said, “an Uzbek, a Pashtun and a Tajik going to the same mosque and living in a single building.” They were alarmed by the number of women outside and not ‘properly’ dressed, but one of the interviewees, enrolled in a computer course and finding that one of his fellow students was female (when that was still allowed), discovered that all hell did not break loose. The five missed the freedom of the ‘jihad’ and hated the nine-to-five routine of office work, but so much of what they encountered in the capital was positive that all but one was moving his family there.

That report was somehow hopeful, suggesting that human interaction could increase knowledge and respect for ‘the other’.<sup>22</sup> This research has suggested otherwise, with both enforcers and citizens feeling alienated and uneasy. Possibly, that was inevitable, given the antagonistic and poorly regulated nature of the enforcer role and their unaccountable power. Rather than individuals encountering other individuals, the enforcers are the face of a state bent on forcing people to change their behaviour, confronting people who are unconvinced of the legitimacy of the changes demanded.

It could be argued that this mission, changing people’s behaviour, conceived as promoting virtue and preventing vice, is *the* central mission of the Islamic Emirate. Chief Justice Abdul Hakim Haqqani in his book, written in Arabic, *Al-Emarat*

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<sup>22</sup> Compare the experiences of Taliban and other Afghans, including officials and members of the Republic’s security forces, during a three-day ceasefire called to mark Eid ul-Fitr in 2017, when, as the author reported, there was an “unprecedented peaceful movement of fighters and soldiers into territories controlled by the other. The media was full of pictures and videos of Afghans in uniform or wearing black turbans fraternising with each other and with civilians.” The Taliban leadership never allowed such fraternisation to occur again: it was too dangerous for the cause. See Kate Clark, [The Eid Ceasefire: Allowing Afghans to imagine their country at peace](#), AAN, 19 June 2018.

*al-Islamiya wa Nidhamuha (The Islamic Emirate and its System of Governance)*, which acts as a blueprint for Emirate governance, argues that their aim is to establish “a government whose hallmark is guidance.” To do this, Haqqani argued, the ‘jihad’ must continue:

*It is not permissible for the soldiers of the Islamic Emirate to forsake jihad solely with the exit of the Americans and their allies from Afghanistan. That is not the aim of the Afghan jihad. The aim of this jihad is the establishment of the order of Almighty Allah over His servants – the inhabitants of Afghanistan – so that they are able to live their lives under the banner of sharia.*

John Butt, in his review of Haqqani’s book for AAN, wrote:

*Haqqani pins down what form this struggle for the implementation of an Islamic order might take. He does so by quoting a verse of the Holy Book which describes true believers as:*

*Those who, if We establish them in the land, say their prayers regularly and pay the poor due and enjoin good and forbid evil [amr bil-maruf wa an al-munkar]. The final outcome of all affairs rests with Allah alone (22:41).<sup>23</sup>*

To repeat one of UNAMA’s conclusions in its April 2025 report, cited earlier, this ministry is powerful: “The inter-institutional implementation and enforcement infrastructure and reach into society the law allows is indicative of the law’s importance and the philosophy behind it, to the *de facto* authorities’ governing vision.” Amr bil-Maruf may have been central to both the first and then second Emirates, but compared to the 1990s, the second Emirate state is far more powerful, better resourced and better able to focus on the ‘jihad’ of establishing its conception of an Islamic state that ‘guides’ its people. At the same time, the population has changed. This is particularly evident in Kabul. In 1994, the Taliban encountered a people beaten down by civil war, bereavement and destruction. The population of the capital is now far larger, more diverse and less easily cowed, at least so far.

Worth noting, as well, is how various of our interviewees took exception, as Muslims, to the Emirate’s vision of Islam. In other words, they were not convinced by the Amr bil-Maruf mission. It is, indeed, the mores of a particular segment of Afghan society that are now being enforced as the virtuous ‘standard’. The Emirate’s fixation on

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<sup>23</sup> See John Butt, [A Taliban Theory of State: A review of the Chief Justice’s book of jurisprudence](#), AAN, 3 September 2023.

the length of men’s beards and, in Hasina’s words, that “a bit of [women’s] hair is visible” – a preoccupation that to her and other interviewees seemed to entirely miss the point of what is right and wrong and of what they, as Muslims, should be enjoined or forbidden to do – is partially explained in Gopal and Strick van Linschoten’s report cited earlier, [Ideology in the Afghan Taliban](#). They argued that, in the pre-war Islamic thinking of the rural Pashtun south, which was dominant in the Emirate of the 1990s (and now informs the current amir’s vision of an Islamic state), virtue stems primarily from ‘doing’, rather than believing:

*Because attaining belief inhered in ritualistic practice itself, virtue was (and continues to be) linked to personal dress, grooming and other everyday behaviour. Ritualistic practice was a way of cultivating moral dispositions, a way of attaining truth. In mainstream, modern, Western epistemology, the mental state determines actions; in the Islam of southern Afghanistan actions constituted the mental state.*<sup>24</sup>

Along with the desire to absolutely prevent fitna by taking a worst-case-scenario approach to regulation, this explains much of what is behind the Emirate’s understanding of amr bil-maruf. Beyond that, though, the fear induced by the enforcers may be the actual main aim of the Amr bil-Maruf system, given the Emirate’s belief in the absolute authority of the Amir and that obedience to him is a religious obligation.<sup>25</sup> Inducing fear in the population is a characteristic familiar from authoritarian states everywhere. Outward conformity of dress and behaviour is – or would also be – a visible demonstration of the power of the Taliban state.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Gopal and Strick van Linschoten note that this notion of virtue “existed alongside competing conceptions of virtue (such as tribal), all of which counted as examples of authentic ethical practices in village life; and … like norms anywhere else, the norms guiding this conception of virtue were rooted in material conditions and power relations,” especially power relations relating to gender.

Also worth noting, is that their report argued that the Taliban as an insurgent force had evolved: “Thus the Taleban no longer adhere strictly or obsessively to the conception of Islam as found in the pre-1979 southern Pashtun village – their views have broadened and morphed into an ideology that appears much closer, for better or worse, to mainstream Islamism (like the Palestinian Hamas or the Tunisian al-Nahda) in the Arab world.” That may be the case. Yet the second Emirate, as it has been established by Amir Hibatullah, seems very strongly to resemble the first.

<sup>25</sup> For more on this ideology, see Mufti Rasheed Ludhianvi, [Obedience to the Amir: an early text on the Afghan Taliban Movement](#), translated and with commentary by Michael Semple and Yameema Mitha, First Draft Publishing – Primary, e-book, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> In a different context – Gaza in 1988-90 – Rema Hammami in [Women, the Hijab and the Intifada](#), Middle East Report 164-5, May/June 1990, reported on the imposition of headscarves on Gazan women “through

However, that so many people in a city like Kabul are flouting the law is also symbolic of widespread unhappiness with the orders and that the Emirate has failed to persuade people of the legitimacy of its rules.



Director Roya Sadat on location, filming a television series in Kabul, an action which could be construed as illegal in multiple ways under the Amr bil-Maruf law.

Photo: Massoud Hossaini/AFP, 21 January 2009

Amr bil-Maruf is the primary vehicle for the state to interfere in people’s private lives. The law explicitly says it is aimed at public behaviour and not “prying into people’s private sins” (article 10), but that is not how it is experienced. “Previously,” said Hasina, for example, “they didn’t interfere much in people’s personal lives, but after this law was established and individuals were given the authority to enforce morality, monitoring the private lives of people in the city has become a reality.” Parvez, after describing what his wife now has to wear if she

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a mixture of consent and coercion,” the latter by the al-Mujamma’ al-Islami, which she described as “an Islamic group whose members consider themselves heirs to the original Muslim Brothers and now call themselves the Islamic Resistance Movement, or Hamas.” When almost all Gazan women, except a few very brave activists, wore headscarves, it made the group look far more dominant than it was: it had, said Hammami, “established a kind of cultural dominance over Gaza.”

wants to leave the house, even if he accompanies her, said: “We don’t want others to interfere in our personal issues. We’re Muslim, so we know what sharia asks us to do, but the Taliban overdo it. They are excessive.” Pari, as well, said that:

*Compared to two years ago, their restrictions have grown even more; now they interfere in people’s personal lives as well. People are living in fear, worried that they might be insulted or humiliated by the authorities of the Islamic Emirate. In some cases, they do humiliate people – there’s a lot of oppression against the public. They do whatever they want, and no one dares to ask why. There’s too much interference in people’s personal lives.*

For many Afghans, what the Emirate considers public behaviour covers aspects of their private lives. In many areas of life, the Taliban state has taken away the autonomy of families to decide what is best for them. It has restricted choice and also the room for manoeuvre within families. Conservative families in Kabul, for example, may not ever have wanted their teenage girls to go to school, but the fact that, under the Republic, schools existed meant they had a choice, and daughters could also lobby their parents to let them go – and point to the example of neighbours’ girls attending as evidence that it was reasonable and normal. Now, there are no secondary schools nor provision for university education for any family to enrol their daughters in, no matter how firmly they believe it is their duty as parents, particularly as Muslim parents, to educate their children, including their girls.

The worst intrusion, of course, lies in the paradox at the heart of the Amr Bil-Maruf regime, that it gives male agents of the state the power to look at and deal with unrelated women, even though this is illegal for all other men. In doing so, it provides a clear opportunity for enforcers to abuse their power, including in what should be women-only spaces or in public spaces where women could expect to be respected.

Significantly, the drive to further induce conformity has, as yet, no end in sight. Mullah Hamdullah, the enforcer from Paktia, summed up the continuing mission of Amr bil-Maruf – to ‘reform’ their fellow Afghans, no matter how long that takes:

*I believe that if someone is truly a Muslim, a real Afghan with dignity, they should support what we do. Amr bil-maruf is a central pillar of Islam and a fundamental principle of any Islamic system. I understand there may be problems in how we implement it, but people’s resistance to it is mostly due*

*to the moral decay in society. For twenty years, a secular government ruled with the direct support of non-believers. They tried to distance people from Islam and Afghan values. So now, when we try to reverse that, naturally, some people are offended. That's to be expected, but in time, things will change.*

Yet, the overall emotion expressed by the members of the general public whom we interviewed was not offence at the enforcers' behaviour, but fear, from some, defiance, and often also bitterness and despair. Even those who feel it is their duty to resist the imposition of Emirate dress codes are powerless to defy other restrictions: there are no secondary schools, for example, to send their older daughters to. Even Zarghuna, the school principal in Loya Paktia, who was the least condemnatory of Amr bil-Maruf out of all our interviewees, described her feelings of desolation, with two daughters who should be in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, but are now left at home, “without direction”:

*These restrictions have made life more bitter for women, especially for those who were educated but are now imprisoned in their homes. And the girls, who come to school with such hope, now see their dreams destroyed and face an uncertain future.*

Pari said that some women “are even tired of living, tired of being women. Sometimes we say: I wish I had never been born a woman, life has become so bitter.” Hasina, the other midwife we interviewed, also described widespread distress and fear:

*Girls are in despair about the future and the obstacles that prevent them continuing their education. Levels of depression and anxiety among them have risen to an unbearable point. The constant limitations and lack of opportunities have pushed many to the brink of hopelessness, with no relief in sight. For me, for my entire family, this law has increased the fear we feel.*

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Cover: Vice and virtue enforcers stop two women with children from entering the Tap-e Gul Ghundi recreational park in Charikar, Parwan province, and enjoying the scented Arghawan (*Cercis siliquastrum*) blossom.

Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 17 April 2024