Is the Taliban's use of cyberspace and their attempt to rule as an emerging liberal state, a security threat to Afghanistan and the West?

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Abstract:

This dissertation is a research study into the Taliban's fight to become an internationally recognised liberal state, their use of cyberspace and if this is a security threat to Afghanistan or the West. This dissertation provides extensive research into the following objectives: to assess to what extent the Taliban is an emerging liberal state, to understand the impact of the Taliban as an emerging state on Afghanistan and the West as well as to understand the impact of the use of cyberspace by the Taliban on their potential status as a liberal state. The research carried out to effectively discuss the objectives was semi-structured interviews and social media analysis. The interviews provided the reader in-depth knowledge to discuss alongside existing literature. The social media analysis mainly focused on how the Taliban's official spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid utilises cyberspace. This dissertation concludes the Taliban are not operating as liberal state so they should not be seen as the new government of Afghanistan. The citizens of Afghanistan are at risk of the Taliban's action. Since the takeover, a humanitarian crisis has been present in the country. The Taliban's use of cyberspace as a state terrorist organisation is not a current cyber threat to Afghanistan or the West. The Taliban have engaged in the cybercrime of fake news. Finally, future risks regarding the Taliban's future use of cyberspace and the possibility of their relationship with China should not be ignored.

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Glossary:

A Mahram	An escort.
Afghan	Something of or related to Afghanistan, for example, people or citizens of Afghanistan.
Amir al-Momein	A leader.
Burka	One-piece that covers the face and body, worn by Muslim women.
CREST	Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats
EU	European Union
Hijab	A traditional covering for the hair and neck worn by Muslim women.
IEA	Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan
IS	Islamic State
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISIS-K	Islamic State Khorasan
Jihadi	An Islamic militant
Niqab	A veil that covers the hair and face, excluding the eyes worn by Muslim women.
NYC	NYC
TA	Thematic Analysis
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UoP	University of Portsmouth
US	United States
USA	United States of America

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background:

The Taliban rapidly re-emerged with their fight to establish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) and imitate liberalism throughout the country. Liberalism was redefined in the 1800s as the freedom to live a happy life without government intervention, however, liberalism is present today in the form of liberatarianism (Ruth, 2021). The definition of liberatarianism differs between countries, in the West we define it as an emphasis of free association, freedom of choice and individualism. The Taliban are attempting to propagate libertarianism in terms of having freedom from Western military forces who were present in their country for over 20 years. The Taliban want to establish IEA to live freely in an Islamic emirate where they can live liberally under Islamic law, not a Western way of life (Mehran, 2022). This began in 2018 in the city of Doha, Qatar and the Taliban peace talks with the previous USA presidential administration (Khan, 2020). Then more recently in August 2021, with the withdrawal of Western military forces in Afghanistan (Mellen, 2022). This dissertation aims to productively discuss the research aim:

Is the Taliban's use of cyberspace and their attempt to rule as an emerging liberal state, a security threat to Afghanistan and the West?

The rationale behind discussing the Taliban's fight to become an emerging liberal state and rule the IEA, includes the loss of innocent life because of Taliban or their presence within Afghanistan. An example of this is the suicide bomber attack at Kabul Airport in August 2021 (Taneja, Sareen, Shah, Mishra, 2021). The attack was claimed by ISIS-K, the Afghanistan affiliate of ISIS and an enemy of the Taliban. The attack which killed 13 US servicemen and at least 170 innocent nationals. The Kabul airport attack was labelled complex by the Pentagon. ISIS-K motives behind the attack was based upon the Taliban's attempt to rule Afghanistan (Spagnolello, Gatti, Esmati, Shahir and Portella, 2021).

The attack on Malala Yousafzai in 2012, is further rationale on why the Taliban's attempt to rule as a liberal state and the potential security threat this imposes must be studied. Malala was age 15 at the time she was targeted by a Pakistani member of the Taliban whilst riding the school bus home. Malala was shot in the head which resulted in her requiring specialist medical attention in the UK and losing part of her skull. The Taliban left Malala with life-threatening injuries due to their disapproval of girls having an education (Saboo, 2022). This dissertation will research how

the Taliban are utilising cyberspace and their attempt to rule as a liberal state within Afghanistan and the possible security threats this may impose on the West and within Afghanistan.

Why Cyberspace?

The rationale behind the need to research the Taliban's use of cyberspace derives from the ever-evolving threat landscape found online. Cyberspace can be defined as an electronic commonplace of digital networks responsible for the storage, modification, and communication of information. Cyberspace includes but is not limited to the Internet (MI5, n.d.). The term, cyberspace, was originally used within William Gibson's (2000) science-fiction novel, Neuromancer

Within cyberspace, users can commit crimes, known as cybercrimes. A multi-disciplinary approach must be taken when attempting to define cybercrime. This includes taking into consideration the criminal justice system, the world of computer science, the law also psychological and sociological approaches. A common definition for the term cybercrime is computer facilitated crime (Yar, 2019). The factor of anonymity cyberspace can offer users, is one of the reasons cyberspace is becoming an increasingly popular location for crimes, (Marion and Twede, 2020). Cyberterrorism can be defined as the use of cyberspace by a terrorist. This use of cyberspace can be as broad as the activity of sending an email to launching an attack on a computer system (Council of Europe, 2008).

The Taliban have utilised cyberspace to propagate a liberal image and to appear as an official government entity. Additionally, to further appear as a liberal state and the government of Afghanistan, the Taliban appointed an official spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid. Mujahid utilises cyberspace within his role and his preferred social media platform is Twitter where he has 650k followers under the username @Zabehulah_M33. Social media platforms are hosted on the Internet and via applications which make up part of cyberspace (Cheong and Lee, 2011). Despite their attempt to appear official on social media, Mujahid has not become successful in being verified on Twitter. Twitter verification via a blue tick was introduced to ensure Twitter users know accounts of public interest are authentic (*About Verified Accounts*, n.d.).

The rationale behind researching the Taliban's use of cyberspace is the previous trends of other Islamic terrorist organisations utilising components of cyberspace such as the Internet and social media. An example of this is ISIS's use of social media during their period of insurgency up until

the collapse of most of their self-proclaimed caliphate in December 2017. ISIS utilised social media platforms that can be hosted on the Internet or via applications to disseminate propaganda, radicalise and recruit fighters including Western fighters (Kadivar, 2017).

Research Aim:

The research aim for this dissertation provides the overall purpose for conducting the research:

> To identify to what extent the Taliban are emerging as a liberal state, how they are utilising cyberspace and is this a security threat to the West or Afghanistan.

The aim was established and written based upon the researcher's initial interest in the dissertation topic. Furthermore, the rationale behind the dissertation, the loss of innocent lives and the Taliban's ability to do more harm in the future with the additional use of cyberspace helped to determine the aim. To try and meet the research aim, the researcher carried out multiple research methods, semi-structured interviews also social media analysis. The third chapter, Research Methodology provides more detail on this.

Objectives:

This purpose of this dissertation is to attempt to answer or discuss the following objectives in relation to the research question:

1. To assess to what extent the Taliban is an emerging liberal state.
2. To understand the impact of the Taliban as an emerging state on Afghanistan and the West.
3. To understand the impact of the use of cyberspace by the Taliban on their potential status as a liberal state.

Outline of Chapters:

Below is an outline of this study, chapter by chapter, each description provides a brief synopsis of what you can expect to read and learn about the research question:

> Is the Taliban's use of cyberspace and their attempt to rule as an emerging liberal state, a security threat to Afghanistan and the West?

Chapter 2: Literature Review-

The following chapter, the Literature Review discusses themes and sub themes relating to the research question:

1. Are the Taliban an internationally recognised emerging state?
2. What is the impact of the Taliban as an emerging state on Afghanistan and the West?
3. What is the impact of the Taliban's use of cyberspace on their potential status as an emerging state and the West?

The above themes have been discussed alongside existing literature on the Taliban, the current situation in Afghanistan and how cyberspace has been previously used by terrorist organisations.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology-

This chapter is written to give an overview of the chosen research design, research methods and the analytical approaches (Thematic Analysis and Social Media Analysis) used for this dissertation. Furthermore, this chapter is home to the challenges and limitations approached throughout the research process and the ethical considerations adhered to throughout this study.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion-

The purpose of this chapter is to present the data collected from the qualitative interviews that underwent thematic analysis and the social media analysis data. The Findings and Discussion chapter discusses the three objectives, how the events of August 2021 were a takeover not a handover, the illegitimacy of the Taliban, the future threats of the Taliban and more.

Chapter 5: Conclusion-

The final chapter concludes the dissertation and discusses to what extent the objectives and aim has been achieved. This chapter presents established conclusions because of the research. Furthermore, recommendations for future research are laid out here.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction:

A definition of the term, 'liberal state', consists of a state that undoubtedly has reformist principles and policies that aim to meet the needs of the state's citizens. In 2021, Western military forces evacuated Afghanistan ahead of a "handover" to the Taliban, a Sunni Islamist extremist group who were responsible for the 9/11 Twin Towers terror attack in NYC during the year of 2001 (Simpson, 2006). This chapter aims to discuss the Taliban and how they relate to several different topics including liberal states, the rights of women and cyberspace.

Methods:

To write this chapter, research was conducted around the central research aim: (Is the Taliban's use of cyberspace and their attempt to rule as an emerging liberal state, a security threat to Afghanistan and the West?) to establish three themes. By utilising the library search engine, other academic databases and Google, literature was compiled surrounding the three themes:

1. Are the Taliban an internationally recognised emerging state?
2. What is the impact of the Taliban as an emerging state on Afghanistan and the West?
3. What is the impact of the Taliban's use of cyberspace on their potential status as an emerging state and the West?

Throughout the initial search for literature, key words such as liberal state, ISIS-K and cyberspace within the literature were searched for. Throughout the reading process of the literature, important notations and key points were highlighted surrounding all the themes.

Theme 1- Are the Taliban an internationally recognised emerging state?

Despite their efforts, the Taliban are not currently recognised as Afghanistan's new government regardless of their seizure of Kabul, the capital city in August 2021. They are however operating as a political entity, a system of governing authority within Afghanistan. In the event the Taliban were to become the de facto government of Afghanistan they would be required to adhere to their states international obligations and be accountable for any breaches. An example of this would be counter-terrorism efforts. They would be responsible for halting finances to terrorist organisations and working to prevent preliminary acts such as radicalisation (Saul, 2021).

Currently the Taliban does not hold a formal constitutional claim to be the government of Afghanistan. In comparison, during 1996-2001, several countries officially recognised the Taliban as the government including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab of Emirates (Gul, 2022).

The Taliban and becoming a Liberal State:

A liberal state can be defined as a state who has reformist principles and policies that prioritise the individuals of their state. This is accomplished through supporting the people's opinions, behaviours and seeing them as an existing threat to the state. A liberal state is unable to operate similarly to a dictatorship which only favours a particular social or political class (Kemp, 2021). Moreover, a liberal state must protect democracy within the state by ensuring multiple political parties are present (*Theory of Liberal State,* n.d.).

Kabul fell to the Taliban on the 15th August 2021. The same month, Western military presence from the USA and the UK were removed from Afghanistan. Post the evacuation of forces, violence has intensified and a noticeable pause on the progress of human rights that developed since the Taliban's past claim to power between 1996-2001 (Mills, 2021). As previously discussed, a liberal state must not discriminate against any of their citizens' human rights regardless of gender, age or religion. The Taliban are currently not acting as a liberal due to the discrimination against females.

The Taliban's fight to become a liberal state can be explained through the Foucauldian theory on governmentality and biopolitics additionally Cohen's theory on Moral Panics (Jessen and von Eggers, 2020). For a democratic society which is what the Taliban should be aiming for to be internationally recognised as a liberal state, they require the Western biopolitical system which can also be referred to as the demo to be compliant with their new Islamic laws, rules and measures (Thompson, 2021).

The current situation in Afghanistan and the Taliban's recent actions have been labelled a humanitarian crisis by the United Nations (UN) (2022). Cohen's criminological theory of Moral Panics (1972) can be applied to the current situation in Afghanistan. In this moral panic, the Taliban are the folk devil and panic is present in the West, Western governments, academics, and women. This is enhanced by the media. Public mass movements usually occur with a panic to raise awareness and demand action. For example, the London protests in August 2021 that

involved signs protesting the Taliban. Due to moral panics surrounding the Taliban's actions in both Afghanistan and the West, they are unable to be recognised as a liberal state ("Thousands rally in", 2021). Furthermore, people from both parts of the world are not compliant with their regime and according to Foucauldian theory, this is necessary for a liberal state.

The Rights of Women and Girls:

Alongside the Taliban's efforts to become the government, the rights of women have been jeopardised. Western governments are fearful for female human and educational rights under the Taliban's regime. In a now deleted tweet, Ghairat, the previous chancellor of Kabul University, a now Taliban member tweeted: "as long as a real Islamic environment is provided, women will not be allowed to come to universities or work. Islam first" (Finnegan, 2021). Additionally, there is not a single female Taliban spokesperson to prevent the hampering of female education rights. Under the Taliban, education will be prioritised to men and a ban is in place to prevent women studying alongside men (Bar, 2021).

The Taliban have released decrees surrounding women's educational rights and requirements on how women may be able to return to education (*Taliban: Women can,* 2021). These include implementing segregated university buses with concealed windows and a curtain separating the male driver to the female passengers, classes for women will be independent of their male classmates and only taught by older female lecturers. In May 2022, Taliban militants demanded that all women must be required to always wear a burka when out in public (*Taliban orders all,* 2022).

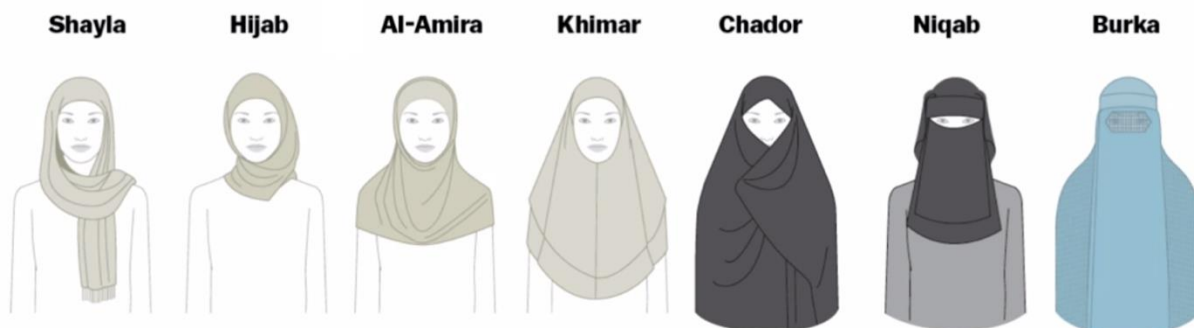**Figure 1:** A symbol of Taliban rule, the blue burka:

("Taliban Religious Police", 2022)

During the period between 1996-2001, a blue burka, became an internationally recognised symbol of the Taliban's previous rule over Afghanistan. The re-integration of this mandatory rule within society is a symbol of the Taliban violating women's basic human rights, segregating them, and not operating as a liberal state ("Taliban orders", 2022). The Taliban's Minister of Vice and Virtue, Shaykh Muhammad Khalid Hanafi spoke out about the implementation of the rule: "we want our sisters to live with dignity and safety" (*Taliban orders all,* 2022). The punishment for not following this decree consists of a father or male relative being imprisoned. The rule is further evidence they are unable to operate as a liberal state. There are other religious garments that allow Muslim women to be modest and help express themselves ("What's the difference", 2018).

Figure 2: Different kinds of religious clothing worn by Muslim women:

Types of Islamic veils

| Shayla | Hijab | Al-Amira | Khimar | Chador | Niqab | Burka |

(*Types of Islamic,* n.d.)

Additionally, to the re-emergence of the burka rule, the Taliban have further broadcasted that all women should remain inside with some minor exceptions such as being accompanied by a chaperone. This pattern of behaviour has been used by other terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, in which women were not commonly seen in public settings. Furthermore, terrorist groups using women has become an element of importance (Bloom, 2015). Through the Taliban ordering women to stay-at-home out of the public eye, they can control and use part of the population to their advantage.

This is the reverse of when the Taliban re-assured the international community they would honour all women's human, education, employment, and societal rights. The UN recently reported on how the rights of females are at a crosshair's again, similarly, to the period of 1996-2001. It has been reported the UN and the international community do not recognise the Taliban ("UN votes to", 2022). Due to the stay-at-home order, only boys returned to school and female professors or teachers were unable to return to teaching (Afghanistan: Taliban orders, 2022). This does not support the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (*"UN Women: The"*, n.d.).

From a political standpoint, the Taliban are enforcing these regulations to ensure they are promoting a way of life under Sharia Law, also referred to as Islamic law, the mission of the Prophet Muhammad in Islam ("What is Sharia", 2021). Sharia law is respected in the religion as God's direct revelation to Muslim brothers and sisters (Johnson, 2022). This can be interpretated in modern times to the legal code within Muslim countries.

The Taliban have been seen to adopt a severe version of Sharia Law prior to 2001 and since August 2021. As a dominated Muslim country, Afghanistan uses Sharia law as their legal code. Throughout the time of Western intervention, the country was seen to embrace a liberal form of Sharia law. This has been reflected in the progression in women's rights up until 2021 (Hozyainova, 2014). In Afghanistan history there have been over fifteen female government ministers prior to the Taliban takeover in 1996 and post 2001, one being Dr. Kubra Noorzai-serving as the Minister of Public Health (1965-1969) (Shah and Amin, 2021).

Prior to their presence in Afghanistan throughout 1996-2001, women could not only dress in what was deemed fashionable in different decades, they were also able to run for government positions. Figure 3 shows women's fashion in Kabul during the 1970s with knee-length skirts, seventies hairstyles and high heels. Figure 4 shows Dr Noorzai who was able to serve in the government not wearing any form of Islamic veil, instead fashionable items such as sunglasses and jewellery (Sarkar, 2015).

Figure 3: 1978 Kabul fashion:

(Sarkar, 2015)

Figure 4: Dr. Kubra Noorzai

(*"Kubra Noorzai, Afghan",* 2021)

Due to the Taliban's strict interpretation of Sharia law, it can be argued their leadership is misogynistic. The Taliban are not operating as a liberal state by not protecting the rights of all their citizens regardless of gender or sex. Moore states how the Quran does not mention the word burka or the mandatory rule to be worn by women (Moore, n.d.). Willow discusses how misogyny can be argued as a hate crime (2021). The Metropolitan Police defines a hate crime as:

"Criminal offence which is perceived by the victim to be motivated by hostility or prejudice based on race, religion, sexual orientation or disability and any crime motivated by a person being transgender" (*"What is hate"*, n.d.).

In relation to Willow's argument, that misogyny should be considered as a hate crime, the Taliban enforcing punishments on men due to a female not remaining in her home or sporting Western dress can be interpreted as a hate crime (Willow, 2021).

Additionally, the Taliban are showing high levels of controlling behaviour over women and children, therefore not respecting the rights of the entire population. The term 'dictatorship' can be defined as a political system where pure power is held by an individual or military organisation to achieve strict state law (Auerbach, 2022). It can be argued, the Taliban are operating as a (jihadist) military dictatorship within Afghanistan because a coup over Western military intervention. Mallat, whose work focuses on the geographical area of the Middle East, describes dictatorship as *"crime against humanity"* (2015). Thus, they can be seen as a threat to Afghanistan national security as they are carrying out crimes against the people due to non-Taliban individuals not following their internationally unrecognised interpretations of Sharia law. On the contrary, to what has been discussed above, a Taliban's spokesperson reported in August 2021 that women will be free to work, however, at this time they provided minor details on how this would be unveiled ("Afghan women to", 2021).

The Taliban and al-Qaeda:
The Taliban previously provided a safe haven or sanctuary for Osama Bin Laden's terrorist organisation, al-Qaeda. Bin Laden and al-Qaeda were responsible for the 9/11 terror attacks that occurred in NYC and killed thousands of innocent civilians. Bin Laden originally formed the group to push the Soviet Union presence out of Afghanistan, however, their aim further developed into forming a caliphate that was governed by Sharia law. Al-Qaeda operated throughout Afghanistan which at the time was governed by the Taliban and were known to be anti the West (Gardner, 2021).

The Taliban who claimed to be in power in Afghanistan during the period of 1996-2001, provided a safe haven or sanctuary for al-Qaeda throughout the country. This was during the same period the FBI were hunting for a hiding Bin Laden who was on the most wanted list. By the Taliban providing a safe place for al-Qaeda and not turning over Bin Laden to have him extradited to the

US following 9/11 whilst claiming to be the government of Afghanistan, they were not following counter terrorism regulations (Shahzad, 2012). The Taliban were upholding their side of an allegiance pledge ("bay'ah") that was agreed during this period. Due to the pledge, the Taliban were committed to protecting al-Qaeda. On reflection of their actions, the Taliban remained loyal to Bin Laden and al-Qaeda (Hassan, 2022).

The Taliban are a national security threat to Afghanistan and its citizens. Hassan argues the Taliban have an unbreakable relationship with al-Qaeda because of their history discussed above (2022). By not cutting ties with al-Qaeda and removing all aspects of the group from Afghanistan, the Taliban are not being seen to be upholding counter terrorism regulations. Therefore, they are not being viewed as an internationally respected liberal state or government and are still a terrorist organisation. As a result, a terror threat surrounding the Taliban cannot be eradicated both throughout the world or Afghanistan (Hassan, 2022).

Theme 2- What is the impact of the Taliban as an emerging state on Afghanistan and the West?

The term 'impact' can be defined as the marked effect or influence (Impact, n.d.) (Goldsmith, 2001). This theme will work to address one of the objectives: to understand the impact of the Taliban as an emerging state on Afghanistan and the West. The West, commonly referred to as the Western world, refers to a variety of regions across the world including Europe, Northern America and Australasia. Throughout this dissertation, the specific regions of the West: the UK and the USA, will be focused on. Furthermore, the country of Afghanistan will be discussed (McNeill, 2016).

Both the UK and the USA are NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) countries. NATO is an intergovernmental military alliance between twenty-eight European countries and two North American countries. Western and NATO forces was present in Afghanistan between the years of 2001 and 2021. These forces were deployed in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks with the purpose to safeguard the area into becoming a safe haven for terrorist organisations who could further attack NATO countries (NATO, 2021). A report by NatCen Social Research conducted in 2012, stated that 8 out of 10 British people have a high or very high opinion of the Armed Forces. On the other hand, 48% of the British public believe it was wrong for the UK to deploy its Armed Forces to Afghanistan (Park, Clery, Curtice, Phillips and Utting, 2012).

The Taliban and ISIS-K:

Marcus (2021) described the removal of Western forces in Afghanistan a "potential disaster" for the war against terror. The Taliban have formerly agreed to not allow a terrorist attack to happen against the West by their own. Despite this, ISIS-K operates throughout Afghanistan and is a growing threat. Following on from the Taliban's public announcement they were going to fight to become Afghanistan's new internationally recognised government, they have had tension with their rivalries: ISIS and ISIS splinter groups (*"Afghanistan: Safety of the UK",* 2021). Due to the contradictory relationship between the Taliban and ISIS-K, the removal of Western forces from Afghanistan and the fight for the Taliban to become Afghanistan's new government there is still a remaining high risk of terrorist attacks within Afghanistan and the West (Ibrahimi and Akbarzadeh, 2018).

An example of how ISIS-K are an ongoing terrorist threat is the catastrophic attack on Kabul airport in August 2021 which was claimed by ISIS-K. In comparison to all the jihadists militant groups within Afghanistan, ISIS-K are the most extreme and violent. The group is made up of recruits from Pakistan and Afghanistan who are most commonly previous members of the Taliban who no longer believe their group were extreme enough anymore. ISIS-K have known clashes with the West, Afghanistan security forces and the Taliban (Gardner, 2021).

The attack resulted in the loss of innocent lives, the deaths included Afghanistan nationals, 13 US servicemen, two British nationals and the child of a British national. The attack was ISIS-K's response to the Taliban taking control of the area around the airport. Thus, the Taliban's fight to become Afghanistan's new government and their control of increased areas throughout Afghanistan as a liberal state has had serious, deadly, and negative outcomes (Liebermann and Bertrand, 2021).

The Impact on Afghanistan:

The withdrawal of the Western forces from Afghanistan can be portrayed as a triumph for the Taliban and the global jihadist movement. Thus, the Taliban can progress forward with restoring IEA across the country. An Islamic emirate can be described as the land or territory controlled by an emir, a male monarch or important male figure in the Muslim world. Ibrahimi (2017) associated the previous IEA with the terms 'war-making' and a 'military-political organisation'. Furthermore, Pantucci and Basit (2021) argued the Taliban victory will assuredly revitalise jihadism throughout Afghanistan that will mirror the country's position in 2001. Controversially, Hashmant Ghani, the

former president's brother, told Al Jazzera he has expressed his belief that it is crucial for the people of Afghanistan to accept the Taliban takeover to escape instability. Additionally, Ghani expressed how he believes if the Taliban form a government, they will be an inclusive and purely Islamic government (Latifi, 2021).

The Taliban have declared a reprieve for all civil servants and a promise of safety for Kabul residents. It is yet to be confirmed that their governing mechanism will uphold essential human rights. Additionally, it has been reported the Hazara community, an ethic Sunni group who reside in the Hazarajat region of Afghanistan, is also the third largest ethnic group in the country, are under persecution by the Taliban (Afghanistan: Taliban tortured, 2021). The disturbing accounts of persecution were disclosed by the human rights group, Amnesty International which originally occurred in July 2021. This is a result of a factor of the persecution, the cutting of phone lines in the captured areas, information about the persecution has only recently been leaked. The killings of nine targeted Hazara men were reported which included methods of shootings sand torture. The case of the Hazara community killings illustrate testimony to how ethnic and religious minorities are at risk of a Taliban government (Afghanistan: Taliban tortured, 2021).

The most common urgent international concern is existence and rise of terrorist organisations and networks throughout Afghanistan. This is a crucial counter-terrorism challenge for countries, governments, and Islamic terrorism threat landscapes especially the one for Afghanistan. Due to the uncertainties of the proposed Taliban government on how it would function, who would be a part of it and whether they would be able to overcome the challenge of adjusting their ideology to align with international human right standards. There are widely discussed doubts over the Taliban's ability to not violate human rights especially in relation to the Sharia law. Kaura (2021) discusses the current oxymoron in relation to the Taliban's attempt to assure the world the rights of women and minorities will be guarded with the proposed Sharia regime, however, international news outlets and academics have their doubts. There is real concern that women will not have the right to work under the Taliban and the return of public beheadings or stoning's of supposed criminals under Taliban rule (Kaura, 2021).

The Afghanistan economy is in near ultimate collapse and way of life has completely shifted since the Taliban take over (Eckert, 2021). The Telegraph reported on the drug usage crisis happening in Kabul, more specifically, the Pul-e-Sukhta bridge (Figure 5). There is a threat to innocent human life because of drug usage which in many cases links back to the Taliban, an oxymoron to the

group broadcasting how they would swiftly aim to solve the capital's drug problem (Farmer, 2022).

Figure 5: Pul-e-Sukhta bridge drug scene:

(Townsley, 2022)

The most common drugs used are meth or heroin, synthetic opioids due to the change in life from the takeover and economic crisis, Moreover, ex-Afghan soldiers became addicted to illegal drugs to stay up at night fighting the Taliban which further enhances how the situation is an oxymoron. The Taliban's only response and minor attempt to claim responsibility for the negative effect on people's lives they have caused, was rounding up addicts of the street and dumping them in rehab facilities ("Under Taliban, Kabul", 2021). This solution was unsuccessful due to overcrowded rehabs and violent events were breaking out. The solution was short-term as the facilities have since persuaded the Taliban to stop bombarding addicts onto them. The impact of the Taliban's purely Islamic rule on Afghanistan and its citizens is yet to be firmly established. For international acceptance the Taliban must not present as a dictatorship but have an ability to confer with international parties and protect the rights of all people (Kaura, 2021).

The impact on the West:

The departure of Western forces in Afghanistan and the Taliban's current victory signifies a turning point in the progression of the global jihad movement. Biscontini suggests that the

definition of the term "jihad", is disputed between Islamic scholars. Some scholars refer to the term as individuals who struggle with temptation and sin. This in contrast to those who define jihad as a Holy War with the aim to kill or convert non-believers (Biscontini, 2020). The global jihad movement is a phenomenon of Islam converts or traditional jihads and armed campaigns against Western ideologies. Since then, the work of al-Qaeda has inspired the global jihad group to progress further & reach other Islamic groups such as the Taliban. The existing threat landscape to the West from the Taliban and their global jihad movement is more complicated and differential. This is in comparison to this threat in the year of 2001 and pre the war on terror (Pantucci and Burit, 2021).

Due to the geographical location of Afghanistan, land in the south and southwest of the country has the ideal conditions for opium poppies, these poppies are used to produce the opioids. Opioids are used in the West to treat chronic pain and are highly addictive which can also be found on the West's drug market. Is Afghanistan a narco-state? (Schweich, 2008). The USA is currently in an opioid epidemic since 2017 as reported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2021). 1.6 million people have had an opioid disorder in the past year and 10.1 million in America wrongfully used opioids deriving from Afghanistan in 2019.

Due to Afghanistan being known as one of the world's largest opium producers, the Taliban have been able to profit off the trading of opium. Peters (2009) writes on how the Taliban have been able to profit off opium poppies to generate income to arm and train their fighters after Western military intervention. Prior to this, the Taliban banned the cultivation of opium-poppy between 2000-2001 resulting to them having territory control over poppy fields. Afghan opium poppies are also used to create illicit drugs and become integrated into the world's illegal drug trade (Scared Straight: Taliban, 2022). Despite the Taliban stating they want to prevent Afghanistan becoming involved with the illicit drug business. Due to nothing being done in terms of prevention methods, the Taliban are having a direct impact on the threat to quality of human life not only in their own country, as previously discussed but the West too (Perl, 2001).

Theme 3- What is the impact of the Taliban's use of cyberspace on their potential status as a liberal state and the West?

The term 'cyberspace', can be defined as a digital commonplace that is compiled of digital networks that have the responsibility for storing, modifying and communication information (MI5, n.d.). A crime that is committed in cyberspace is referred to as a cybercrime. To define the term

'cybercrime', a multidisciplinary approach needs to be adopted, however, in simple terms, a cybercrime can be defined as a computer facilitated crime (Holt and Bassler, 2020).

Cyberterrorism is one of many cybercrimes. Similarly, to defining the term cybercrime, defining cyberterrorism is not a straightforward process. This is a result of animosity between scholars, politicians, and members of the media. A broad definition of cyberterrorism is the usage of cyberspace by a terrorist. This definition covers a wide range of activities such as sending an email or launching a purposeful attack conducted by a terrorist organisation towards a computer network (Council of Europe Publishing, 2007). In relation to Islamic terrorism, the term 'cyber jihad' has been used to describe actors of Islamic terrorist organisations such as the Taliban who use cyberspace (Davis, 2006). Terrorist organisations can exploit the capabilities of cyberspace and digital technology to recruit and radicalise members. This dissertation aims to provide an evaluation of the Taliban's use of cyberspace including social media and digital technology (Townsend, 2021).

During the 1990's, a period where the Taliban have been said to have power in Afghanistan, the use of the Internet was forbidden, however, they are now embracing cyberspace. In comparison to the previous government, the Taliban have been seen to be more active online. The Taliban have taken advantage of Twitter's capabilities, to broadcast their beliefs and connect with their oppositions. Twitter allows users to post "tweets" up to 280 characters (Twitter, n.d). Furthermore, the Taliban's use of cyberspace has been recognised as a method to persuade and intimidate the Afghan people (Mozur and ur-Rehman, 2021). The aim of the Taliban's social media campaign is to document their accomplishments in their campaign to become Afghanistan's new government. A social media campaign assures you can engage with an audience in real time (The power of, n.d.)

Due to the Taliban's new attitude to digital technology, social media and the Internet, they can carry out planning and coordination online. Not all Taliban members need to be in the same country to plan an attack or methods of recruitment and radicalisation. This can develop the Taliban's global jihad movement discussed above, as the Taliban can convert individuals to their ideology without being in the same geographical location as them. Additionally, this further diversifies the Taliban's membership in terms of ethnicity and international presence (Schneider, 2021).

Through the Taliban's use of social media, it provides them with a platform to share propaganda and attempt to manipulate the West with hopeful improvements to their regime. The Taliban's aim is to be seen as a legitimate government on an international scale. They want to deceive journalists in the West by posting only what they want them to see. The Taliban spokesperson, Mujahid, has been an active Twitter user for several years. Mujahid employs Twitter to disperse disinformation that meets his desired intention. Mujahid does not require advanced media expertise to use Twitter (Thorbecke, 2021). On the contrary, the Taliban have enlisted a group of multi-lingual personnel who help their messages reach a wider audience than those who speak the native languages of Afghanistan: Pashto and Dari or Arabic, a common language spoken within Islamic terrorist organisations.

An online forum, commonly referred to as a community discussion board can be defined as a discussion site in which users can conduct conversations in the form of messages, pictures or videos which cannot be lost once it has been viewed (O'Keefe, 2008). Jihadist terrorist organisations create "jihadist websites" that are not user-friendly and where jihadist forums and chat rooms are hosted to carry out extremist social networking. Online jihadist forums are further utilised to disseminate information such as propaganda for the purpose of radicalisation or recruitment. Additionally, the forums are used to broadcast open-source intelligence gathered by jihadist organisations such as profiles of enemies (Erez, Weimann and Weisburd, 2011). Additionally, the Taliban's newly found attitude to digital technology, the Internet and social media, further enhances the active threat of jihadist sites relating to the Taliban to appear (Atiq, 2021).

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this chapter provides a wider outlook of the research question using a wide range of literature and three themes. The literature review has aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the Taliban's fight to become an internationally recognised emerging state, the impact of the Taliban's re-emergence on Afghanistan and the West also the Taliban's use of cyberspace. The purpose of this chapter aims to fill a gap in the readers knowledge and the industry's outlook on the ever-emerging issues from the fall out of Western troops in Afghanistan. The next chapter on Methodology will contribute to the readers understanding on what and how research is being carried out to further discuss the research question.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction:

The purpose of this dissertation is to discuss the research question: is the Taliban's use of cyberspace and their attempt to rule as an emerging liberal state, a security threat to Afghanistan and the West? The research question will be discussed in relation to the research objectives:

1. To assess to what extent the Taliban is an emerging liberal state.
2. To understand the impact of the Taliban as an emerging state on Afghanistan and the West.
3. To understand the impact of the use of cyberspace by the Taliban on their potential status as a liberal state.

To discuss the research question and objectives as well endeavour to identify to what extent the Taliban are emerging as a liberal state, how they are utilising cyberspace and is this a security threat to the West or Afghanistan, two research methods will be used: two semi-structured virtual interviews with the qualitative data undergoing a thematic analysis and a social media analysis. Throughout this chapter, the rationale on why these research methods were deployed, how they were conducted, the ethical considerations, limitations and challenges of the research process will be discussed.

Research Design:

Research design can be defined as the blueprint or strategy for the measuring and analysis of data. The researcher established their research design after establishing any queries surrounding the topic of the research through a meeting with their supervisor. Throughout this meeting, potential research objectives and a hypothesis were discussed (Akhtar, 2016).

3.2.1 The Rationale for Research Design:

The researcher required a research design, by having a design, the researcher's level of stress was minimised, and it ensured they were carrying out professional research. Through creating the design via conversations with their supervisor, the researcher was able to establish their research was possible and realistic. This ensured that filling in the SCCJ Ethics Form was not a waste of time for both the researcher and supervisor. Additionally, the design provided the researcher with an estimated time frame required to complete the research within the academic

year (Leavy, 2017). Nevertheless, despite having a research design, there is still a risk the researcher may have encountered some obstacles throughout the research process.

COVID-19:

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic has become less of a threat to human life since it originally started, all interviews will be conducted online to prevent unnecessary contact with individuals who are living very different lives (Beck and Hensher, 2022). This ensures precautionary measures for both the interviewer and the participant as individuals are still able to contract COVID-19. Moreover, by carrying out the interviews online via video conferencing software, travel costs are minimised and there is no expenditure for the research project. The chosen video conferencing software is Google Meet (www.googlemeet.com). The UoP provides students with Google email addresses that can access Google Workspace. Google Meet is compatible with Android, Microsoft and iOS. Google Workplace offers secure encryption which will ensure the sensitive interview data from the research to be secure. Additionally, a benefit to using Google Meet includes the ability to turn on closed captions which can aid the transcription process later (Novak and Bottorff, 2022).

The Research Methods:

To implement the research design discussed above, the researcher must conduct research methods. Research methods are the strategy required to complete the research design (Keenan, 2020). To be able to discuss the question, qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews were conducted. Furthermore, a social media analysis, which is argued as blurring the lines between qualitative and quantitative research, has been conducted (D'Orazio, 2013).

Qualitative research methods are appropriate for this research as the purpose of the methods is to explore, describe and explain a topic (Morse and Field, 1996). The researcher has explored the research question by carrying out interviews, a social media analysis and discussed the question using the collected research data alongside existing literature. Qualitative research methods result in qualitative research data, non-numerical data such as words and images. The research data derived from the interviews include answers in the form of oral descriptions. Qualitative data is unable to be measured (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003)

<u>Semi-Structured Interviews:</u>

Interviews, a research method, use conversations as a tool for learning and developing knowledge. An interview can be conducted in a variety of methods including semi-structured or structured. The researcher chose semi-structured which is also referred to as an open interview where questions can be asked beyond the set of pre-approved questions (Appendix 1). This is an advantage of semi-structured interviews as the researcher can dive into new ideas and provide a space of elaboration on themes throughout the interviews (Wengraf, 2001). Additionally, a further advantage of semi-structured interviews includes the ability for a rapport to be established. A rapport can be defined as building a stronger connection with others and in turn, you can understand them deeper. Common interests, mutual understanding and empathy are all ways an individual can build rapport. When a rapport is built up in an interview, it positively affects how comfortable the interviewee feels throughout the process and their ability to answer questions about their experiences openly (Glazier, 2015).

An important factor that can affect how successfully rapport is built up is proximity. To elaborate, the researcher and the interviewee must be within proximity to achieve clear eye contact. As previously mentioned, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the developments in "working from home", the researcher decided to contact the interviews online. Through Google Meet and the ability to make eye contact via webcams, the researcher was able to have eye-contact with their participants and build rapport (Lapidot-Lefler and Bazark, 2012). This is a preferred method over via the telephone, where eye-contact is unreliable. Due to the interviews being online, the researcher was able to recruit a participant in a different time zone which helped to resolve the issue of finding participants. Without the interviews being online, the researcher would have been unable to interview the participant (Lee-Kelley and Sankey, 2008).

The Recruitment Process and Sample:

The researcher began the recruitment process by sending an invitation letter to a gatekeeper at CREST (Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats). The letter was attached to an email that was sent to the address found on their *'Contact'* page (CREST, n.d.). The rationale for choosing CREST as an organisation to approach was because of their association with the UoP. Throughout their undergraduate degree at UoP, the researcher became familiar with CREST and their work surrounding global security threats. In response to the invitational email, the researcher was directed to the *'Authors'* page to contact possible participants directly (CREST, n.d).

In total, seven individuals who were listed on the *'Authors'* page were contacted via email address linked to their profiles on the webpage. Each profile includes information on the individuals such as their place of employment, their speciality and recent literature. When searching through the profiles, the researcher has a pre-determined set of key words to be looking for, such as:

- The Taliban
- Afghanistan
- Terrorism
- Cyberterrorism
- Jihadi
- Jihadism

Everyone's profile who was contacted by the researcher included several of these keywords. The responses received by the researcher were unfortunately not all positive. Several responses declined the invitation to take part in research for various reasons, including paternity leave. In the end, the researcher recruited a participant from CREST, however, due to the lack of positive responses from those at CREST, the researcher had to increase their scope. This included recruiting the other participant, an academic and an individual within the cyber security industry. The researcher was drawn to this individual after researching them due to their achievement of being previously voted as one of the 50 most influential women in cyber and part of this research includes the rights of women and children.

Social Media Analysis:

During the ethical approval stage of this research project, the researcher was denied the use of a social media analysis tool as the Ethics Committee believed it could pose some risks. To overcome this, the researcher decided to carry out a small social media analysis manually. The data derived from the analysis was inputted into a Google Sheet, a further component of the Google Suite/Workspace provided to UoP students (https://www.google.co.uk/sheets/about/).

The purpose of a social media analysis is to identify trends within the data deriving from social media platforms that are being analysed. To conduct the social media analysis, the researcher created a Google Sheet to input and store the data (Figure 6). To collect the research data, the researcher input key words or phrases linked to the research question, literature review themes and interview questions into the Twitter search engine, for example, 'The Taliban and Women'.

The researcher then deciphered through the results to find one that was relevant and useful (Gonçalves, 2017).

Figure 6: Blank example of Social Media Analysis Google Sheet:

The purpose of a social media analysis is to collect the following data:

- The number of followers a social media account has.
- What impressions the social media post has, for example, how many likes, comments, shares or mentions and how people have generally interacted with the post.
- Clicks and traffic- if there are any links embedded within the social media post.
- Engagement

The researcher inputted the data found into the correct tables and a screenshot of the tweet on the right-hand side (Hegelich, 2018). The tables ensured the data was stored logically and was able to be used in the following chapter, Findings and Analysis.

Thematical Analysis (TA):

After the transcription process, a TA will be conducted on the interview data. This type of analysis is carried out to discover any recurring themes or patterns within qualitative data. The researcher decided upon this method of analysis due to the accessibility of the method for any researcher, despite their level of experience and knowledge (Guest et al., 2021). Furthermore, the researcher chose the thematic approach as it can be used alongside a variety of other research methods whilst still providing rich data. A TA is an appropriate approach for this dissertation as it can be combined with other analysis methods such as social media analysis. Additionally, the approach is effective when a researcher wishes to examine the perspectives of multiple participants. The aim of the TA is to highlight all similarities and difficulties within the transcripts. Furthermore, a TA will highlight any anticipated views touched upon within the transcripts (Terry et al., 2017).

The Flexibility of TA:

Terry et al (2017) discuss how the thematical approach to analysis is flexible which in turn makes the approach stand out from other qualitative analyses. The flexibility of the approach makes it appealing to less experienced researchers. The flexibility of the TA extends to the suitability of the approach in analysing a range of data sets: focus groups, textual data from qualitative survey and analyse face-to-face data collection methods such as interviews, the data being used with this research.

The flexibility of TA further relates to the multiple possibilities for coding. The process of 'coding' consists of identifying a section within the data, searching, identifying themes within them, and finding similarities between them. For this dissertation, the researcher took multiple approaches when conducting the TA: an inductive and semantic approach (Hawkins, 2017).

TA Methodology:

A TA was carried out on the two qualitative data sets that derived from interviews of participant 1 (P1) and participant 2 (P2). The interviews were carried out on Google Meet and screen recorded to ensure the close captions were able to be referred to during the transcription process. The transcription processes were completed manually by the researcher. The interviews were transcribed before the analysis process took place. To ensure the researcher was able to conduct the TA effectively, they thoroughly read over the datasets before they began (Gavin, 2008). This was completed to ensure maximum familiarity with the data and complete the familiarisation step of TA.

Post the familiarisation step, the researcher commenced identifying codes and noting these on Google Docs, a word processing software within the Google Suite. This process is completed multiple times to ensure all codes are identified and noted down. If this step is not completed multiple times, a vital code may be missed. Codes are typically derived from what are considered relevant and fascinating. The outcome of the coding step is the production of a concise outline of the transcripts (Scharp and Sanders, 2018). An example of a code is *'outrage'*. Throughout the coding step, the codes are continuously revised to certify relevance to the objectives and research question. Once all the final codes are established, the researcher collates them together to generate themes to complete the step of TA, generating themes. A further step of TA is to review the themes to ensure they remain relevant to answering the research question (Marczak and Postavaru, 2016). These themes were created because of the codes being grouped together based on the determination of patterns within datasets and the completion of the step of appropriately naming within TA. An example of a theme is: Hierarchical Relationships. The Literature Review chapter assists the researcher in appropriately naming the themes by referring to professional academic literature (Tuckett, 2004).

Ethical Considerations, Limitations and Challenges:

The ICJS ethics committee approved the researcher's ethics form in March 2022. The researcher has considered ethics throughout the research process in several actions discussed below.

Throughout the research process, the factor of anonymity has consistently been adhered to. This has been ensured at no time releasing the identity of the participants throughout the entire research process. The participants have only been referred to as P1 or two for identity protection purposes. A further reason behind this method is to prevent any unwanted attention that may cause the participant's harm (Kennedy, 2008).

To additionally ensure ethical considerations, the right to withdraw was heavily promoted throughout the research process. The purpose of this was to assure the participants were completely informed on their right to withdraw from the research, prior and two-weeks post interview. The right to withdraw was clearly stated in the Research Participant Information Sheet, Research Consent Form and within the concluding message of the interviews (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2018).

As part of the research process, the researcher had a debrief with the participants after the interviews were concluded to ensure any unanticipated emotions that may have stemmed from the interviews did not psychologically harm the interviewee. The debrief included the contact information of the researcher and the dissertation supervisor, if the participant had any concerns or required further support (Ridge, 2018).

A limitation of the chosen research methods including, qualitative interviews, thematical analysis and a social media analysis is that the methods are time consuming. This is especially relevant for the transcription process of the interviews. Time consuming methods can add to the researcher's level of stress, however, along with the content of this chapter, the researcher has deemed these the most effective in answering the research question. The confidence of these methods by the researcher in term counter-effects the concerns of stress (Persaud, 2012).

A social media analysis (SMA) carries the risk of harm towards the researcher's subjects, for this dissertation, Twitter users that are not well-known public figures. To prevent a risk of harm and not breach the Twitter users privacy or anonymity, the researcher will be anonymising all tweets that are not by well-known public figures. This will prevent the social media users whose tweets have been collected as part of the SMA from being exposed to a risk of reputational damage, prosecution or threatening behaviour. The researcher has a duty of care to prevent such risks (Townsend and Wallace, n.d). The method of anonymising tweets will include blacking out areas of the tweet which make the user identifiable. An example of an individual whose tweets will not be anonymised is Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban's official spokesperson and well-known public figure in Afghanistan.

Conclusion:

The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the rationale behind the chosen research methods and how these answer the research question in the most effective manner. The chosen research methods included qualitative interviews, a thematical analysis of the interview data and a social media analysis on the social media platform, Twitter (Wengraf, 2001). A qualitative interview grants the interviewee with a platform to communicate their answers in their own words in comparison of other research methods that limited responses such as surveys. Despite the time-consuming factor of the methods, the researcher is aware of the benefits the methods bring to productively answering the research question. The next chapter will see the final step of a thematic analysis be completed, the write up process.

Chapter 4: Findings & Discussion

Introduction:

To discuss the research question effectively and thoroughly, this chapter will break the research question (is the Taliban's use of cyberspace and their attempt to rule as an emerging liberal state, a security threat to Afghanistan and the West?) into two parts:

Is the Taliban's use of cyberspace a security threat to Afghanistan and the West?

Is the Taliban's attempt to rule as an emerging liberal state a security threat to Afghanistan and the West?

Moreover, the themes that have been established because of the thematic analysis and social media analysis will be discussed in accordance with the research objectives:

1. To assess to what extent the Taliban are an emerging state.
2. To understand the impact of the Taliban as an emerging state on Afghanistan and the West.
3. To understand the impact of the use of cyberspace by the Taliban on their potential status as a liberal state and the West.

The Participants:

This chapter presents the findings of the conducted research methods, semi-structured interviews, and a social media analysis. To carry out the two semi-structured interviews, two participants were recruited, and their findings have been discussed below. P1 is an individual associated with CREST (the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats), whereas P2 is an academic who works within the cyber security industry (https://crestresearch.ac.uk/). Both participants provided their insights into the research question on the Taliban, their fight to become a liberal state and their use of cyberspace.

Takeover not a "Handover":

Despite media portrayal, the period of Western military withdrawal in August 2021 was not a handover or the act of handing something over, instead it was a complete takeover by the Taliban. The Taliban have assumed control and possession of a country, however, the Afghanistan the

West left behind has changed significantly. The takeover began in 2018 in Doha with talks between Taliban and the previous United States (US) administration (Ellis, 2021).

P1:

"Albeit it wasn't a phased withdrawal, that it should have been and it was more of a forced withdrawal with the Taliban takeover."

"Withdrawal of military support and action in terms of the Taliban taking over, it wasn't a government entity taking over, isn't supportive of Afghan nationals."

"No, there hasn't been a handover. It was a takeover, although named handover, that's I guess more of a media and nicety that has been given to make it seem that we, the West had control over the situation when they didn't, they were pushed out through the Talban takeover and so there wasn't a handover period."

The Doha Agreement:

The Taliban takeover was premeditated and began in late 2018 when the Taliban met with the former US administration in Doha, the capital city of Qatar. The Doha Agreement was labelled as a peace talk to discuss ending the war in Afghanistan. The key word in the previous sentence is, Afghanistan, however, official Afghan leaders were not present in Doha in 2018 (Curtis, 2021).

P2:

"I think it's a mistake to disaggregate August 2021 from the process in Doha. It's very important to appreciate how the previous President Trump had engaged in negotiations through Mike Pompeo, the Secretary of State with Taliban leaders but excluded Afghan leaders and Afghan women."

"Starts in 2018 with this Doha process, not having women peacemakers at the table sort of have an interest in the status of women, not having representatives from the Afghan government. So there were not normal peace talks, ordinarily you have all parties to the conflict present."

This is when the Taliban takeover began. A peace talk regarding Afghanistan should have included all those who would have been affected by the withdrawal of military forces (Curtis,

2021). Afghan leaders both male and female should have been present alongside the possibility of Taliban leaders. The Taliban have no female representatives to discuss the status of women in the country. The result of not having a single female representative being invited to the talk is the undoubtable setback for women's rights in Afghanistan. From 2018 onwards, the Taliban have provided evidence themselves on why they are unable to be internationally recognised as a liberal state. A liberal state aims to prioritise all individuals of their state (Kemp, 2021). The Taliban chose to go to Doha to represent Afghanistan and pushed the government out. By the Taliban not having a single female representative they are unable to be seen as prioritising the female population in Afghanistan. Thus, to discuss the research objective, to assess to what extent the Taliban are an emerging state, the Taliban have not been operating as a liberal state since 2018, despite their fight to become one. Furthermore, a threat to the security of women within Afghanistan can be seen from this point onwards with non-inclusive peace talks between the former US administration and the Taliban (Sahrai and Scheyer, 2022).

The illegitimacy of the Taliban and their takeover:

The Taliban are not a legitimate government despite their personal declaration and fight to become a liberal state. The takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban is not legitimate but an outcome of force and oppression. The UN, an intergovernmental organisation who aim to maintain international peace and security among nations also not a single country, recognise the Taliban as Afghanistan's new government (UN, n.d.). In December 2021, a UN committee deferred a decision on who will represent Afghanistan, resulting in the Taliban not being allowed into the world body (Nichols, 2021). The Taliban takeover was a surrender of the former US administration.

P1:

"No, because they don't take the individuals needs and from their movement on supporting an individual, or communities needs again."
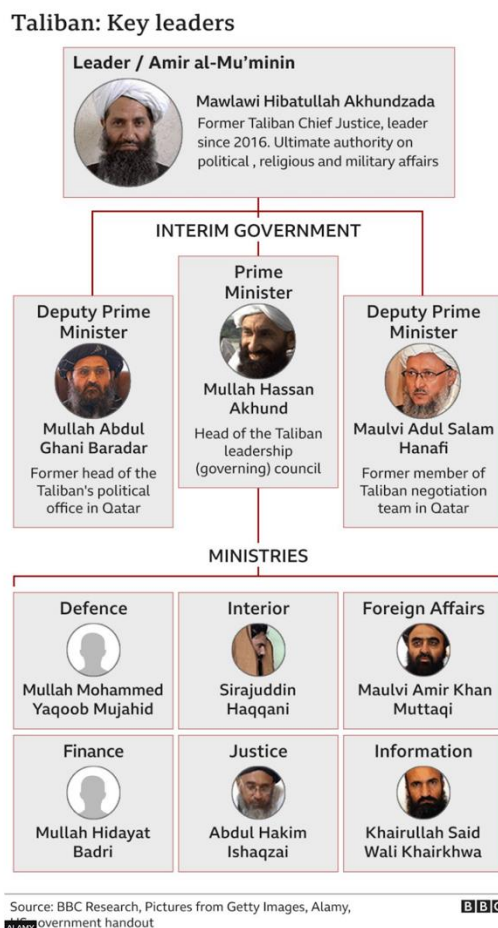
P2:

"Now, on the one hand, the agreement that was made between Mike Pompeo and the Taliban was: if the United States did not withdraw from a certain time, there has been a sort of not so much as a cold peace but an agreement, a gentlemen's agreement to not engage in violence against the Americans. That deadline was fast approaching, so if the United States didn't

withdraw the Taliban felt, well we told you if you didn't leave by a certain date we promised you, we would start attacking again."

"No absolutely not, actually I don't think they should be recognised at all, they are a borderline narco terrorist organisation that are ruling over a population by engaging in terrorism, in coercion and extreme cruelty and violence."

The Taliban are not a democratic government entity. The Taliban were not voted into being the new government by the people of Afghanistan. They self-declared themselves as the government, similarly to how a dictator behaves. The Taliban dictatorship began on 15th August 2021 with a coup d'état, this event has been nicknamed the 'Fall of Kabul' (Coulson-Thomas, 2022). The Taliban entered Kabul armed to begin their work on their hopeful IEA takeover. This was conducted after the surrender agreement also referred to as the Taliban peace deal or The Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the previous US Secretary of State and the Taliban (O'Connell, 2021). The agreement can be seen as ineffective following the militant overthrow within Kabul. Unlike the overthrown fifth president of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, the third supreme commander (leader) of the Taliban, Mawlawi Hibtullah Akhundzada was not elected to this position of power by the people of Afghanistan (Coll and Entous, 2021). Despite the Taliban announcing a new interim government, this government has not been elected in, which is the usual custom to ensure a government represents the majority of individuals in the country. Akhundzada is the head of this interim government whilst additionally being listed on the UN's blacklist and there is not a single female in his cabinet ("Taliban still illegitimate", 2022).

Figure 7: The Taliban & their government:

("Hardliners get key posts", 2021)

Furthermore, the Interior Minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani is on the FBI's (The Federal Bureau of Investigation) most wanted list. Haqqani is wanted for questioning in connection with a 2008 terror attack on a hotel in Kabul that left killed six people (FBI, n.d.). Moreover, Sirajuddin Haqqani is part of the Haqqani terror network who act as a liaison between the Taliban and al-Qaeda. In complete hypocrisy, Haqqani is ultimately responsible for combating terrorism, overseeing the police and further security services (Raghaven, 2021). The individuals listed above who are responsible for the deaths of innocent individuals should not be representing a country. They are criminals and terrorists, not legitimate government leaders. Thus, to discuss the first research objective, to assess to what extent the Taliban are an emerging state, the interim Taliban government situation in Afghanistan and fall of Kabul can be labelled as a humanitarian crisis. A series of events that have produced a threat to health, safety, security or wellbeing of a community or larger group of individuals, in this case, a country (Donnelly, 1993).

The Taliban's Relationship with China:

China, similarly, to the Taliban, are anti the West. The country of China is the world's second largest economy behind the US, making them one of the world's most powerful country's (Griswold, 2010). The Chinese government has an interest in the Taliban and their fight to become Afghanistan's next official government. Despite not formally accepting the Taliban as the new government, China has welcomed the Taliban into the Afghanistan Embassy in Beijing. The countries minorly border one another via a small geographical corridor near the Northwest of China and the province of Xinjiang. There is a potential risk that China will become allies with the Taliban and accept them as the new government of Afghanistan to keep Muslim practices out of their country and provide benefits to the Taliban's war-torn country (Murtazashvili, 2022).

P2:

"They might do well to convince China and its neighbour Pakistan because we do know China has moved into South Asia and Africa as part of the Belt and Road initiative and they they've been funding a lot of foreign direct investment from China as a way of promoting and promoting their soft power."

China and the Taliban would become allies to both benefit one another. The Xinjiang province in NW China is home to around 12 million Uyghur people. Uyghurs are a Turkic ethnic group who are native to Xinjiang and speak their own language. They are the second largest Muslim ethnicity in China, in a predominantly Buddhist and Protestant country. There are reports the Uyghur culture is under threat and Islam is an important part of their identity (Davis, 2008).

The genocide against the Uyghur people is said to have begun in 2014. A genocide can be defined as the event of one group or nation attempting to stamp out a specific ethnicity, race, national or religious population (Arthur, 2021). The methods that have been reported to carry out the genocide by the Chinese government include involuntary confinement within "re-education camps" to forcefully indoctrinate Uyghur's with the Han Chinese (China's largest ethnic majority) way of life, the shooting of innocent individuals who try to escape and sterilisation. The Uyghur birth rate has diminished due to the mass sterilisation and implantation of IUD (intrauterine device) birth control into Uyghur women. Additionally, to the acts against individuals, there have been reports of the Chinese government destroying mosques and banning certain religious practices by the Uyghur people (Sigal, 2021).

The Chinese government is justifying their actions because they believe all Uyghur people are at risk of becoming Islamic terrorists. This would be a threat to the Chinese Communist Party. There is a risk China will become allies with the Taliban to establish an agreement preventing further Muslim infiltration into their country via the border and the involvement of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, a militant of group of Uyghurs with the Taliban ("What is happening", 2021). The Chinese government can offer the Taliban infrastructure development within their war-torn country with their Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI was developed in 2013 and has helped many economically deprived countries, stretching as far as East Africa to develop large infrastructure projects such as ports that provide local employment, help build up cities and generate large investments for China investors (Jin, 2016). The Afghanistan economy is in collapse after being a country of war for over 20 years. The BRI also works to expand China's influence on trade (Campbell, 2021). In discussion with the second research objective, to understand the impact of the Taliban as an emerging state on Afghanistan and the West, if the Taliban were to become allies and seen a legitimate government entity by China who have an anti-West powerful government, this could start a rolling effect of other anti-Western countries such as Russia further accepting the Taliban as an official liberal state. The Taliban would be accepted by powerful international anti-Western states that pose a security threat to Western countries such as the USA and the UK (Murtazashvili, 2022).

A Taliban 2.0:

The 2022 earthquake in Afghanistan:

A 6.1 magnitude earthquake occurred in Afghanistan in June 2022 with a death toll of at least 1150. The earthquake caused thousands of livelihoods to be disrupted and destroyed agricultural land throughout the country. It can be argued the Taliban have recently acted as a liberal state, who support the needs of the entire population by asking for international aid which has not been a common practice of theirs previously ("Afghanistan Earthquake Victims", 2022).

P1:

"Particularly aid as well because aid hasn't been very welcomed, although, I will say, actually the Taliban asked this morning for help because the earthquake that happened yesterday, it's all of a sudden they have have opened up which is interesting because up until that point they have asked for nothing, they didn't want aid, supporting charities for example, and now they are actually asking for that."

"The country is in need and because they cut themselves off from the rest of the world, they don't have the infrastructure to support over a thousand now medical cases, farms would of been, it's a very agricultural country. Farms would of been destroyed and food chain supplies are now going to be extremely limited and so they're looking at it from a global cry, whether it's for individuals or the Taliban. I think it's going to include both.

Following the earthquake that affected Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan, the official spokesperson of the Taliban and their proposed IEA, Zahihullah Mujahid spoke out about the need for aid in Afghanistan. The results of the social media analysis (SMA) carried out by the researcher found Mujahid retweeting a tweet he was tagged in, that included a clip of him speaking to BBC News Persian about a serious need for clothes, food and medicine in the earthquake affected areas.

Figure 8: Mujahid retweeting a clip of him speaking to BBC News Persian:

(Mujahid, 2022)

The Taliban have not welcomed international aid before as they believed non-governmental organisations or charities may spread Western ideologies ("Afghanistan Earthquake Victims", 2022). The Taliban welcomed aid from different countries and non-government organisations such as The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) (IFRC, 2022).

Figure 9: A tweet by the IFRC surrounding the Afghanistan earthquake:

(IFRC, 2022)

In discussion with research objectives one and two:

1. To assess to what extent the Taliban are an emerging state.
2. To understand the impact of the Taliban as an emerging state on Afghanistan and the West.

By the Taliban having a more positive and open outlook on asking as well as accepting international aid that is benefiting those affected by the earthquake, it can be argued that they have operated as a liberal emerging state. The Taliban have proactively requested for international aid that benefits all individuals without the need to meet any special requirements which as previously discussed, fits the definition of a liberal state (Kemp, 2021). The aid has not been seen to only benefit the Taliban. In discussion of the impact of the Taliban as an emerging liberal state. This action by the Taliban can be seen as a positive impact for the country of Afghanistan and its people, especially regarding medicine for the injured.

A recent development in the Taliban's and China's relationship:

The earthquake that caused the Taliban's public cry out for international aid has further strengthened the possibility of China and the Taliban becoming important allies, as discussed previously. On the 28th June 2022, Mujahid, the official spokesperson for the Taliban tweeted

thanking China for the two planes full of aid supplies and shared pictures of a Chinese ambassador shaking hands with a Taliban official (Yawar, 2022).

Figure 10: Mujahid tweet thanking China for their aid supplies:

(Mujahid, 2022)

The tweet received 1170 likes. The gifting of aid supplied by one of the most powerful economic countries in the world may fast track a reliant relationship between China and the Taliban. Yawar (2022) reports on China having a tour of the country following the earthquake to look at the land's mining abilities.

Why there is no Taliban 2.0:

Despite now accepting international aid to support the people of Afghanistan following a natural disaster. The Taliban are not a "new" Taliban, and we are not seeing a 2.0 version of the Taliban that is any different than their rule pre the war on terror. The Taliban had no choice but to ask for international aid after the earthquake due to the economic crisis throughout the country (Akbari and True, 2022). Moreover, the Taliban have broken promises surrounding females' rights of an education and forced extreme Islamic dress codes onto Afghan women.

The Taliban had no choice over international aid:

The end of the war in Afghanistan caused an economic collapse including companies like MoneyGram eventually stopping money transfers to Afghanistan. Furthermore, due to not a single government accepting the Taliban as the new official government, countries with central bank assets with the overthrown government such as the US, were not made available to the Taliban. Germany suspended their foreign aid to the country once it was announced the Taliban were taking over (Nagesh, 2021) The natural disaster saw the Taliban using pulling on heart string tactics to receive aid as they had no other choice.

During the interview process, the participants were asked about their reaction to the economic collapse in Afghanistan, P2 said:

P2:

"Yeah, but, you know you have mismanagement, the Taliban are not you know, you don't have a lot of economic PhDs running around in the Taliban…any organisation or non-state group that has it's antagonism towards Western education, you are not going to see a lot of economists"

"I mean that's just, and the Taliban had been engaged in sort of charm offensive that oh you know it's a different Taliban, it's a Taliban 2.0."

The natural disaster of an earthquake, which the Taliban had no control over, however, gave them an opportunity to receive foreign aid because like many natural disasters or humanitarian crisis's, people want to help those less fortunate. For many individuals, they won't see the international aid directly helping the Taliban. They will see it as helping those whose lives have been affected by a deadly earthquake. This is human nature for many caring individuals (Hsu et al., 2005). Moreover, unlike other governments, the Taliban have little funds as a government entity to help those affected by the earthquake. The US administration expressed their concerns on the Taliban interfering with foreign aid and they required more evidence of the plans for dissemination of the aid before sending it to Afghanistan (Sullivan, 2022).

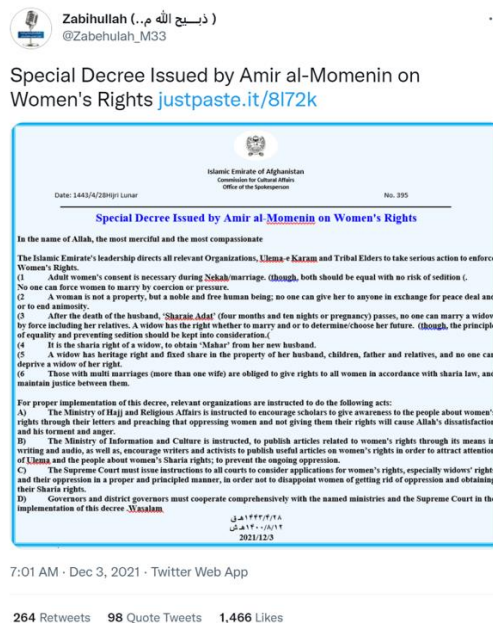**The hypersegregation of women under the Taliban:**

The Taliban have broken their own promises surrounding the rights of women within Afghanistan, this includes but it is not limited to, hypersegregation. This can be defined as the targeting of a specific group, in this case females, with strict rules which separate them from those who believe they are superior to the victims, for example, the all-male Taliban (O'Neal, 2022). The Taliban are enforcing hypersegregation on the female population of Afghanistan to remove them from society.

P2:

> *"Well, I mean it's worse than that, it's not just the hypersegregation in Afghanistan of women. It's that they also closed all the government agencies for the protection of women. They closed the agencies that govern prevention of domestic violence."*

This is in contrast to a tweet by Mujahid on the 3rd December 2021 which contained a decree written by Akhundzada, the amir al-momenin (leader) of the Taliban on women's rights. The tweet which received 1466 likes, set a positive tone for women's rights back in December 2021.

Figure 11: A Special Decree Issued on Women's Rights:

(Mujahid, 2021)

The reality of the decree's effect on the rights of women can be discussed alongside the Taliban attack in Mazar-e-Sharif, a city part of the Balkh province. The attack has not been widely reported by Western media outlets, however, academic Mia Bloom who works with several anonymous Afghan women alongside her studies, provides an insight into the situation. Bloom reports on the capturing of 40 Mazar-e-Sharif citizens and alleged gang-raping of eight women at the end of January 2022. The individuals were captured because they were trying to escape the country by air and the Taliban deemed their travel illegal (Bloom, 2022).

A tweet by Mujahid and reports by Bloom also the Dawn, a Pakistani newspaper present the Taliban's attitude towards females in the situation. Bloom and the Dawn reported that Taliban spokesperson Mujahid tweeted around the time that the women arrested "remain detained because their male relatives have not yet come to escort them" (Bloom, 2022) ("Taliban detain 40", 2022). The tweet by Mujahid, the official Taliban spokesperson, announced that several individuals who had been previously detained had been released but the women involved were still in detention due to their relationship with certain males.

Figure 12: Mujahid's Twitter statement on the Mazar-e-Sharif situation in January:

(Mujahid, 2022)

The second point of the Special Decree issued on women's rights (Figure 11) says as follows: *"a women is not property, but a noble and free human being; no-one can give her to anyone in exchange for a peace deal and or to end animosity"* (Mujahid, 2021). Thus, due to the Taliban keeping the females involved with the Mazar-e-Sharif situation detained because of the actions of their male relatives or not having a male escort to collect them, the women are not being

respected as free human beings. Furthermore, the women are being treated as property of men by the Taliban because they are being punished for their actions that are not their own and being unable to be released freely without an escort (a mahram) as an innocent citizen despite their gender (Doucet, 2021). In discussion with the second research objective (to understand the impact of the Taliban as an emerging state on Afghanistan and the West) since the Taliban takeover Afghanistan in August 2021, the attitude towards women's rights by Taliban leaders has been negative and has wrongfully impacted women.

The female population of Afghanistan have been further segregated through the Taliban's stay-at-home order and removal of the right of an education for young girls. Shortly after their takeover in August 2021, the Taliban reversed the female population of Afghanistan's right to go to school and have a career back to their previous reign of 1996-2001 (Doucet, 2021).

P2:

"Even the Taliban made promises which they subsequently broke for example, allowing women primary school education or even high school education and that's been since rescinded."

Pre the war on terror, it was normalised that females would not leave their homes apart from a few strict exceptions and only boys were allowed to attend school. During the 20 years of Western military presence, young girls attended school and many women had successful careers such as doctors or bankers. Jain (2021) discussed how nine female bankers and the female bank manager for Azizi bank in the city of Kandahar were forcefully removed by the Taliban, escorted home by armed men and were told not to return to work, however, their male relatives were able to have their jobs.

P2:

"That's the only comparison I can make, you wake up one day and it's for the Afghan women, everything that people worked for, for two decades is gone. So it's very bad for the effect on women."

On the 17th August 2021, Mujahid attended his first news conference as the Taliban's official spokesperson and he said, *"you need to go back to work, we need to get the country working properly again" , "women will be able to work, women would be able to continue in their daily lives but only under the rules of Islamic Sharia law"* ("Taliban say Afghan", 2021). A week later the

Taliban broke this promise and ordered all women and young girls to stay-at-home due to fears Taliban soldiers may harass women as they have not been trained to deal with them. The Taliban emphasised this would be a temporary situation, however, not a single female has returned to work or school in August 2022, a year later (Astor et al., 2021).

Figure 13: Tweet about female education:

A reminder that it is not just over 300 days that #girls have been banned from #schools in #Afghanistan, they have been deprived of two academic years. There will barely be any girls giving university entrance exams this year. #letgirlslearn

5:12 PM · Jul 22, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

149 Retweets   **13** Quote Tweets   **383** Likes

(ANONYMOUS, 2022)

The tweet which received 383 likes and has been anonymised due to security concerns, however, is a reminder that the Taliban are yet to reinstate Afghanistan's female population the right to an education.

P1:
"That's their way of being able to control. So the next generation, it is going to be all about control because if you get them from a young enough age, then that's just the way of life, that is just the way it is."

Thus, in discussion with the research question and the second research objective (to understand the impact of the Taliban as an emerging state on Afghanistan and the West), the right to education for females in Afghanistan is under threat and at risk of extinction. The Taliban since their takeover have negatively impacted the ability for women to gain an education in Afghanistan, get a job in the future due to the lack of reading and writing skills or make their own income (Akbari and True, 2022). As a result, despite the words of the Special Decree on Women's Rights, women will become property of men because they have no choice but to rely on men to survive and will be unable to live independently.

What the reintroduction of the burka represents:

The mandatory rule of Islamic dress and women wearing a burka came into place in May 2022. The burka is more than just an item of Islamic clothing but a symbol of further hypersegregation, hypersexualisation and visual elimination of women in society (Emil, 2022).

P2:

"So I think that the regressive & patriarchal policies that are represented by the burka…it's the notion that women are both at the same time infantilized & hypersexualised because men can't control their urges. We have to eliminate the presence of women from society, or if there is a woman, stick her under this long flowy cloth. It's problematic, it's goes back to a time where women were men's property rather than any idea that women and men are equal and it spawns a lot of other problematic institutions & cultural norms about violence against women, intimate partner abuse, child marriage."

"I think for me those burkas are representative not just of the physical separation of women and their elimination from societies like their visual elimination but also it represents the scores of anti-women legislation."

Many Muslim women choose to wear a form of Islamic dress, for example a hijab or niqab because they want to, not because someone else or a male is telling them too. The choice to wear a burka should be down to the female themselves, not the Taliban. The Taliban have enforced burkas onto women in response to concerns of hypersexualisation and concerns over their soldiers harming of harassing women (Astor et al., 2022). In further discussion with the second research objective, the Taliban are attempting to resolve a security threat to Afghan women deriving from their own male soldiers by forcing women to cover themselves head to toe in a burka. This not only causes a lack of sense of identity and prevents women from expressing themselves through clothes but distracts from the main concern, the Taliban's own (Astor et al., 2022).

An ever-changing threat landscape:

The country of Afghanistan, it's neighbouring countries and the Middle East are known hotspots for terrorist organisations. Additionally, terror organisations such as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) have been known to have presence and fighters in the rest of the world. Part of the Taliban's

fight to become internationally recognised as Afghanistan new official government entity is their responsibility to uphold internationally respected counter terrorism regulations. Despite a fight to end the war on terror, terrorist organisations continue to develop and launch attacks globally (Cragin and Chalk, 2003).

ISIS-K:

ISIS-K are a known enemy of the Taliban, this was represented with the 2021 Kabul airport terror attack which was ISIS-K's response to the Taliban taking control of Afghanistan. Despite the Taliban claiming to be a government entity, does a highly debated previous or current terrorist organisation can uphold counter-terrorism regulations within Afghanistan? (Mehra and Coleman, 2021).

P1:

"They're still part of the world, so it's within their best interest, particularly if they want to trade with outside countries, and they have suggested they want to build a relationship with the West."

P2:

"I think they will eliminate any rivals and they will call it counter terrorism."

The Taliban have attempted to make it appear they have an interest in upholding international counter terrorism regulations by appointing a Interior Minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani. As previously discussed, Haqqani is on the FBI's most wanted list for his connection to a terrorist attack in Kabul that took place in 2008. The Taliban have not effectively appointed an appropriate Interior Minister who is responsible for combatting terrorism not only in Afghanistan but internationally through working with the international community. They have appointed a terrorist to combat terrorism ("Taliban's Most Wanted", 2022).

ISIS-K are in a current phase of aggression against the Taliban, their home-turf enemy. The group is made up of ex-ISIS soldiers, Afghanistan nationals and the previously discussed Uyghur people of China (Aslam, 2022). The Taliban's relationship with China has been developing since the earthquake in Afghanistan and as previously written, the Chinese government are working towards eradicating the risk of terror within the Uyghur community. It could be argued the Taliban's relationship with China is beneficial to their fight on terror ("What is happening", 2021).

The Taliban recently completed a mission in Taloqan, the capital city of the north-Western province of Takhar which resulted in the death of eight and capture of three ISIS-K militants. Mujahid expressed that the raid resulted in the destruction of funding, equipment and a training centre for the group. The raid which is a positive step in the Taliban's direction for countering a terrorist organisation within Afghanistan. ISIS-K has the means to kill innocent Afghan's and international lives. The raid was carried out by the General Dictorate of Intelligence, the IEA special forces ("Taliban Claim Killing", 2022). The director of the IEA special forces organisation is Taliban member, Abdul Haq Wasiq. Since its establishment in 2021, the General Dictorate of Intelligence has arrested 600 members of Islamic State. The establishment of the Dictorate can be argued as the Taliban upholding counter terrorism regulations and them joining the international fight against combatting terrorism ("Taliban Claim Killing", 2022).

The Taliban's use of cyberspace as a state terror organisation:

The Taliban have developed into a jihadist state terror organisation since their takeover in 2021 has previously made threats of terror towards the West but have not carried out acts are now recognisable under the definition of a state terrorist organisation. This is similar to their period of insurgency from 1996-2001 (Ibrahimi, 2017).

P2:

"I think the Taliban are going to fall into this category that is not as well studied which is state terror because they control the means of a state."

Claridge (1996) discusses state terrorism as acts of terrorism conducted by a state towards their own citizens or another state in this The Taliban. Acts of terrorism can be defined as unlawful uses of violence or methods of intimidation, especially against civilians to pursue political aims (White, 2002). The Taliban's method of intimidating the female population into staying at home through the fear of violent repercussions to their male relatives is an act of state terror. The Taliban have continued their war against women which was present before Western military invasion in 2001 (Palmer, 1998).

In discussion with the third research objective (to understand the impact of the use of cyberspace by the Taliban on their potential status as a liberal state and the West) the Taliban are utilising cyberspaces in specific ways as a jihadi state terror organisation. Their use of cyberspace differs in comparison to how ISIS utilised social media to radicalise, recruit and disseminate propaganda

via an e-caliphate (al-Masaeed, 2018). Despite their previous hatred for digital technology and cyberspace, the Taliban are using it as a tool to legitimise their fight to become an internationally recognised liberal state.

P2:

"I don't know how much of it is used to recruit partially because the Taliban are controlling the state."

Through their appointment of an official spokesperson, Mujahid and his Twitter account which is home to avid tweets on updates of their believed progress in becoming the new government, the Taliban are using cyberspace to convince others they have changed (Aikins and Huylebroek, 2021). Regarding the impact of the Taliban's use of cyberspace and the second part of the research question, is the Taliban's use of cyberspace a security threat to Afghanistan and the West? The Taliban are not using cyberspace to actively recruit foreign fighters the way ISIS did which in some cases, we saw young, vulnerable individuals travel to the then Caliphate to become terrorists (Awan, 2017).

P2:

"So, they don't need to use it for recruitment, I think what they can and have been doing is, they might be using social media as a cover and then part of that charm offensive."

The Taliban are using cyberspace as a method of convincing foreign states they can govern Afghanistan officially. As a result, their use of cyberspace is not a current security threat to the West as we are not seeing trends of foreign fighters or international fighters from the Taliban (Awan, 2017).

Fake News:

The Taliban's use of cyberspace can be argued as not a threat to the West both as a security threat or a national threat. Their use of cyberspace is not threatening the well-being of the West's population unlike when ISIS utilised social media to recruit a high number of foreign fighters via grooming on the Internet and dissemination of propaganda via social media. Additionally, they are not using cyberspace in manner that would cause a security threat in the West. They are not known to be carrying out cybercrimes that result in data theft, or ransomware attacks (Blaker, 2016). The Taliban's use of cyberspace is however damaging the reputation of cyberspace. An

example of this would be their posting of fake news. Mujahid is publishing fake news surrounding the Taliban's actions which make them appear as if they are a liberal state. Due to the removal of Western military forces, there are very few individuals who can verify their actions or speak out against what the Taliban are portraying online. An example of the Taliban's fake news is the Special Decree of Women's Rights (Figure 11) (Tracey, 2021). The decree was posted in an official looking document style which to the average Twitter user, the layout of the document with official IEA logos that appear to be an official government logo can cause their judgement to be deceived. The user may believe what they are reading is factual, however as previously discussed the Taliban have not respected women's right in the way the tweeted decree says they will (Miller, 2019).

Cyberspace, digital technology, the Internet and social media are constantly criticised for causing issues within society. The criticisms include but are not limited to, negatively effecting mental well-being or physical well-being, damaging individual's reputation and cybercrimes such as fake news cause disrupt in important societal matter, for example, elections. By the Taliban engaging with the fake news phenomenon and this cybercrime they are adding real-life examples to the bad reputation of cyberspace and damaging its societal reputation (Berger, 2017). Their use of cyberspace is not a security threat to the West or Afghanistan, however, since their takeover, their actions are harmful to the Afghanistan population.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

To conclude, the Taliban's use of cyberspace is not a security threat to Afghanistan and the West, however, their attempt to become an internationally recognised emerging liberal state and become the new government is a national threat to the country of Afghanistan. The aim of this dissertation was to identify to what extent the Taliban are emerging as a liberal state, how they are utilising cyberspace and is this a security threat to the West or Afghanistan. To attempt to meet this aim, research objectives were identified. The research question was:

Is the Taliban's use of cyberspace and their attempt to rule as an emerging liberal state, a security threat to Afghanistan and the West?

To discuss the research question, the dissertation research began with a literature review around the three main objectives. The literature review aimed to provide a collective of current knowledge, theories and real-life examples surrounding the dissertation.

Following Chapter 2 was the methodology chapter. For this dissertation, two research methods were deemed appropriate to answer to proactively discuss the research question, semi-structured qualitative interviews, and a social media analysis. The conducting of interviews was time-consuming for researcher in terms of transcribing them, however, they provided in-depth answers that were discussed in the following chapter. The social media analysis caused the researcher stress because they were unable to use the original tool proposed to the Ethics Committee which was done manually, however, it provided excellence supporting evidence to the interview question answers.

The findings and discussion chapter laid out and discussed the findings of the two research methods which help to form the dissertation conclusion. To meet the first objective: to assess to what extent the Taliban is an emerging liberal state, the following were researched.

The Doha Agreement, where the Taliban takeover not handover began. The conference in Qatar between the previous US-administration and not a single Afghan official or women was present, just the Taliban. There is no female representation with the Taliban, a liberal state prioritises all individuals of their state, the Taliban has no member to discuss the status of women in Afghanistan. The UN, an intergovernmental organisation whose aim is to maintain peace

internationally does not accept the Taliban as the new government of Afghanistan. Furthermore, not a single country has accepted the Taliban's IEA (Curtis, 2021).

The Taliban were not officially elected as the new government of Afghanistan as a political party. They self-declared themselves as the government. This occurred via a coup d' état, a military takeover nicknamed as the 'Fall of Kabul' and began a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. The interior minister of the self-declared Taliban government, Sirajuddin Haqqani is a terrorist on the FBI's most wanted list for his connection to a terrorist attack that occurred in 2008. Haqqani is part of the Haqqani terror network who work with both al-Qaeda and the Taliban (Coulson-Thomas, 2022). A liberal state must work to help combat terrorism internationally and their interior minister of their government is a wanted terrorist.

To meet the second objective: to understand the impact of the Taliban as an emerging liberal state, the following were researched.

The Taliban have potential to become allies with China, an anti-Western country. The Uyghur people of China, a Muslim community whose culture is under attack by the Chinese government, are victims of a genocide. The Chinese government are concerned the Uyghur people will join or start an Islamic terrorist group which could threaten their communist country (Sigal, 2021). The province where the Uyghur people are located is near the minor border between Afghanistan and China. The Chinese government and the Taliban would become allies to benefit one another. The Taliban would be able to assist in preventing further Muslim infiltration into China and in turn, China's Belt and Road initiative would be able to help re-build infrastructure in Afghanistan, a war-torn country. This allied relationship could start a rolling effect of more anti-Western countries such as Russia to become allies with the Taliban which would be a concern for the West (Jin, 2016).

The earthquake that occurred in June 2022 provided a further development to the possibility of the China becoming allies with the Taliban. China provided aid to the Taliban which was accompanied with a visit by a Chinese ambassador who toured the country to assess mining capabilities (Yawar, 2022).

Women have become hypersegregated within Afghanistan. Since their takeover, the Taliban have reversed women's rights. The Taliban's stay-at-home order has removed women from society. Women were removed from their jobs through intimidation and violence. Their jobs and careers were offered to their male relatives. The order further resulted in girls being pulled out of school

and stripped of their right to an education. The younger female population of Afghanistan are now at a disadvantage in terms of their development in reading and writing, getting a job or making their own income in the future (Astor et al., 2021).

The Taliban attack in the city of Mazar-e-Sharif occurred due to a group of citizens attempting to leave the country by air illegally. Several individuals were detained for questioning surrounding the incident and then released. The women questioned were unable to leave custody until a male relative or male escort came to collect them. This broke the Special Decree for Women's Right released by the Taliban leader in 2021 which claimed women were not property of men. Women have no choice but to rely on the male population and are unable to live independently (Bloom, 2022).

The re-introduction of mandatory wearing of a burka for all women in Afghanistan by the Taliban is a symbol of further hypersegregation and hypersexualisation. A burka should be worn out of personal choice and not forced. The order was introduced out of concerns Taliban soldiers would harm women. Women are being further removed from being active within society because of Taliban soldier's wrongful behaviour and lack of respect towards women (Emil, 2022).

The Taliban's re-emergence with their fight to become the Taliban's new government resulted in loss of innocent lives. ISIS-K, the Taliban's enemy retaliated to their re-emergence by launching a suicide bomber in Kabul airport, however, the Taliban have recently attempted to counter ISIS-K terrorism in Afghanistan. The Taliban's General Dictorate of Intelligence raided a training camp for ISIS-K which resulted in the death of eight ISIS-K militants and three to be captured (Mehra and Coleman, 2021).

To meet the third objective: to understand the impact of the use of cyberspace by the Taliban on their potential status as a liberal state, the following was researched. The Taliban can now be recognised as a jihadist state terrorist organisation. The Taliban self-declared themselves the government of Afghanistan and have since committed acts of violence as well as methods of intimidation against their own citizens for their own political aims (al-Masaeed, 2018). The Taliban are utilising cyberspace as a state terrorist organisation by using the social media platform Twitter as a tool to legitimise their fight to become an internationally recognised liberal state. The Taliban appointed an official spokesperson, Mujahid who has 650k followers on Twitter who tweets regularly to convince the rest of the world the Taliban has changed. The Taliban have committed a cybercrime by posting fake news. The Taliban share information online in the form of official

looking IEA government documents, however, their actions do not match the information (Miller, 2019). The Taliban are ruining the reputation of cyberspace, digital technology, the Internet, and social media by promoting fake news and further fuelling the negative opinion on the evolution of digital technology.

In conclusion, the research and key findings in this dissertation have proven the Taliban are not operating as a liberal state and should not be recognised as the new government of Afghanistan. The Taliban are a threat to Afghanistan's citizens and there is a current humanitarian crisis within the country due to their illegitimate takeover. The Taliban are using cyberspace as a state terrorist organisation, however, their current use of cyberspace is not a security threat to Afghanistan or the West. The Taliban have committed a cybercrime by publishing fake news. Lastly, a future security threat via the Taliban's use of cyberspace or the risks of a development in their relationship with China should not be ruled out.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1: Listed of pre-approved interview questions-

What was your reaction to the Western military forces being posted to Afghanistan in 2001?

Do you feel the Western military forces had a positive impact whilst they were situated in Afghanistan up until 2021?

Do you feel the presence of Western military forces throughout Afghanistan had a positive impact on the West up until 2021?

The final withdrawal of Western military forces in Afghanistan occurred on the 30th August 2022 with the US military. Do you think the removal of Western military forces from Afghanistan was the right move for both Afghanistan and the West? You can answer in 2 sections if preferred.

This period has been nicknamed the "Handover Period." Do you feel a true handover between the Western governments, militaries and the Afghanistan government truly occurred?

The Taliban's victory spiked an economic crisis throughout Afghanistan. The Taliban previously stated how they would solve the drug crisis within Kabul, the capital. Ex-Afghan government soldiers would take drugs during long periods of fighting with the Taliban. The Taliban are now patrolling the streets of Kabul, rounding up drug users and raiding rehab facilities who were left with overcrowding. Do you feel the Taliban are responsible for an economic crisis throughout Afghanistan?

Do you feel the Taliban have impacted the use of drugs by Afghan citizens?

A liberal state can be defined as a state who has reformist principles and policies that prioritise the individuals of their state. Do you consider the Taliban to be operating as a liberal state?

Do you feel the Taliban can be internationally recognised as a liberal state?

What is your reaction to the Taliban's fight to become Afghanistan's new government?

The Taliban previously stated how they would not allow terrorist activity to occur throughout Afghanistan. ISIS-K (Islamic State Khorasan) are an Islamic splinter group who operate throughout Afghanistan. They claimed responsibility for the attack on Kabul airport in August 2021. Do you feel ISIS-K are a prominent terror threat to both Afghanistan and the West?

The Taliban and al-Qaeda are known to have close ties with one another. The Taliban have previously provided a safe haven for al-Qaeda including their leader Osama Bin Laden after the 9/11 Twin Towers terrorist attack in New York. Do you believe the Taliban have a responsibility uphold counter-terrorism regulations & promises throughout Afghanistan?

Do you feel the Taliban could completely cut ties with al-Qaeda?

May this year, the Taliban reintroduced the mandatory rule of burkas, specifically, blue burqas to be worn by all women when they are out in public. This is similar to their ruling period of 1996-2001. What is your reaction to the Taliban's reintroduction of the mandatory wearing of Burkas by Afghan women in all public settings?

In August 2021, the Taliban released a statement ordering all women except a select few to remain at home. This included only boys attending school. All girls were stripped of their right for education & female professors were ordered to stop teaching. What is your reaction to the Taliban's stay-at-home order for the majority of Afghanistan's female workers?

Do you feel what we have discussed above is in accordance with Sharia Law?

We have seen previous terrorist organisations, specifically, Islamic terrorist groups utilising social media for propaganda dissemination, radicalisation & recruitment. What is your opinion of the Taliban now embracing digital technology & social media?

Do you think the Taliban have the capabilities to utilise the powers of social media in terms of radicalisation & recruitment?

A broad definition of cyberterrorism is the use of cyberspace by a terrorist which can range from activity such as sending an email or launching an attack on a computer network. Do you feel the Taliban have the means to not only act a contemporary terrorist organisation but also a cyberterrorist organisation?

Do you feel as if the Taliban are an active threat to their country, Afghanistan and the West?