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## 3.7. Human rights defenders, activists and others perceived as critical of the Taliban

### COMMON ANALYSIS

Last update: May 2024

This profile refers to persons who, individually or in association with others, act to promote or protect human rights and fundamental freedoms. It also addresses the broader topic of perceived criticism of the Taliban, including in relation to protests and other open criticism of the Taliban, such as criticism expressed via social media.

### COI summary

In Afghanistan, human rights concepts are often seen as an alien, Western, or a non-Islamic concept. Intimidation, harassment, threats and violence against human rights defenders and activists were committed by all parties in the previous conflict. [[COI query on journalists, media workers and human rights defenders](#), 2., pp. 7-12; [State structure](#), 1.8.1., p. 23; [Conflict targeting](#), 1.2.9., pp. 48, 51; 1.5.1., p. 65; 2.3., p. 74]. The Taliban have persistently shown intolerance of any dissent, by silencing any criticism against them and limiting the fundamental rights and freedoms of Afghans [[Targeting 2022](#), 1.2.1., pp. 36-38; 2.1., p. 57].

Since the Taliban takeover, civic space has narrowed down significantly. Although the Taliban have expressed their commitment to respect human rights, they have claimed to do so 'within the framework of *sharia*'. Several edicts have moreover prohibited criticism of Taliban officials and limited the possibilities to stage protests and to conduct critical reporting. Although criticism occurs, the Taliban have suppressed some dissenting voices. Even seemingly minor actions, such as private persons posting content on social media, have led to detentions. One source pointed out that anyone can face consequences, and in some cases also family members to activists have been detained [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.1.3., p. 20; 4.7., pp. 92-93].

Civil society organisations have been targeted by the Taliban raiding their offices, freezing bank accounts and forcing organisations to close their offices. Human rights defenders and other civil society actors have largely halted their activities out of fear of repercussion, and many have left the country. The Taliban reportedly perceive some activists and critics as being under Western influence, which 'justifies' their repression. Particularly women activists have been targeted, but also men who have voiced their concerns regarding women's rights. Two identified repressive

actors within the *de facto* state administration are the Taliban GDI and the Taliban MPVPV [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.2., p. 24; 4.7., p. 91].

Media and human rights organisations have been under pressure, *inter alia* by rules limiting media content, a ban on defamation and ‘unproven criticism’ of *de facto* government officials, as well as ‘open criticism’. The *de facto* state authorities have interfered with the work of media outlets and have detained journalists as well as human rights activists [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.1.3., p. 20]. Human right violations such as killings, arbitrary arrests, incommunicado detentions, torture and ill-treatment, and threats or intimidation were attributed to the *de facto* authorities [[Targeting 2022](#), 8.2., p. 168].

The situation for activists and protestors deteriorated following the December 2022 decree banning women from university. There were reports of ‘protestors in Kandahar being chased away and potentially being shot at on the street’, and protests in Kunar and Khost provinces were met with violence, while beatings of female protestors were also reported in Kabul City and Herat City. Prominent Afghan education activist and founder of a local NGO, Matiullah Wesa, was arrested on 27 March 2023 and detained until 26 October 2023 on unspecified charges, as it had become publicly known that he was meeting with foreigners and going abroad. Also his family was targeted, his house was raided and at least two of his brothers were also briefly detained, while another fled the country. During March 2023, university lecturer, Islamic scholar and activist Rasool Parsi was also arrested, after having criticised the Taliban on social media. He was sentenced to 16 months in prison in October 2023, for blasphemy and for propagandising. The Taliban have also arrested other male activists advocating for girls’ education, including Ahmad Fahim Azimi and Sadiqullah Afghan, who were arrested in mid-October 2023 [[COI Update 2024](#), 3., pp 3-4; [Country Focus 2023](#), 4.7., pp. 91-92].

Reports of arrests and detentions included family members of individuals perceived as critical of the Taliban [[Country Focus 2023](#), 4.7., p. 93]. One female activist was held in custody together with her son, and another together with her husband and four-year-old child [[COI Update 2024](#), 3., p. 4].

Sources reported that family members of activists and journalists have been targeted by the *de facto* authorities to obtain information and for intimidation purposes. Reportedly, family members of individuals participating in women’s rights protests during 2022 were arrested and asked to provide all the names of male relatives of the family [[Country Focus 2023](#), 4.10., 95-96].

Although since the takeover some deadly attacks on human right defenders were also attributed to ISKP and unknown perpetrators, no specific information on ISKP attacks against activists and human right defenders was found within the reference period July 2022 – September 2023 [[Country Focus 2023](#); [Targeting 2022](#), 8.2., p. 168].

## Conclusions and guidance

**Do the acts qualify as persecution under Article 9 QD?**

Acts reported to be committed against individuals under this profile are of such severe nature that they amount to persecution (e.g. killing, abduction, arbitrary arrest and detention, beatings, torture).



### **What is the level of risk of persecution (well-founded fear)?**

For human rights defenders and activists, well-founded fear of persecution would in general be substantiated.

For others who may be perceived as critical of the Taliban, the individual assessment should take into account the visibility of the applicant, the sensitivity of the topic of criticism and the extent of its public nature. Other risk-impacting circumstances, such as gender and ethnicity, may also be relevant to the assessment.

Family members of individuals under this profile may also have a well-founded fear of persecution. Family members of female activists may particularly be at risk.



### **Are the reasons for persecution falling within Article 10 QD (nexus)?**

Available information indicates that persecution of this profile is highly likely to be for reasons of (imputed) political opinion and/or religion.