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## While the Taliban struggle to govern, the Afghan opposition is continuing to mobilize

[Luke Coffey](#), May 06, 2023 20:55



At least 13 members of the Taliban's so-called government are under some form of UN sanctions. (AFP/File) Short Url

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A lot of the recent focus regarding developments in Afghanistan has been on the increase in transnational terrorist groups operating there and the difficulties the Taliban are having trying to govern and secure the country. However, there has been another important development regarding the nation and it is one that took place thousands of miles away.

Last week, more than 30 activists, journalists, religious scholars and former Afghan government officials met in Vienna to discuss a single shared issue: opposition to the Taliban. Referred to as the **Second Vienna Conference**, it was, as the name suggests, the second such meeting of opposition representatives in Vienna since September last year.

The first meeting was notable because it acknowledged the commander of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan, Ahmad Massoud, as the de facto leader of this anti-Taliban opposition movement. It was also noteworthy because it was the first time that such a gathering had taken place on the international stage since the Taliban regained power in August 2021.

The second gathering in Vienna included an even more diverse group of participants, including activists from many different backgrounds, ethnic groups and religious affiliations. Although the center of gravity for the conference was Massoud and the National Resistance Front, the National Resistance Council for the Salvation of Afghanistan was also represented. It is an anti-Taliban movement founded in Turkiye last year by prominent Afghan power brokers living in exile.

In addition, leaders and representatives of the Hazara and Uzbek minorities were present at the conference. Almost half the participants were women. And for the first time, even an Afghan Sikh, Anarkali Hunaryar, participated. In 2010, she was the first non-Muslim woman elected to the Afghan parliament.

As in September, the participants at the latest conference issued a joint statement outlining their belief that the status quo under the Taliban is unacceptable for Afghanistan. There was an emphasis on the protection of basic human rights, especially equal rights for women and minorities, and the fact that these rights are non-negotiable.

This time, however, the participants also agreed to “support all forms of resistance against the

Taliban,” including armed resistance. This went a step further than what had been agreed in September. Although smaller armed groups are emerging in Afghanistan, the National Resistance Front remains the only credible, capable and non-extremist armed opposition to the Taliban. Based in Panjshir province, and with a smaller presence in a dozen other provinces across the north of the country, it has continued to fight the Taliban, against all odds and with no international support.

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*Luke Coffey*

The group recently made it through a second harsh winter in the mountains of Panjshir. If last year was anything to go by, it will soon begin to launch offensive operations against the Taliban, predominantly in northern Afghanistan. Militarily speaking, the goal of the National Resistance Front is to establish an area of control in the north of the country, similar to what its predecessor, the Northern Alliance, did in the 1990s.

The **Second Vienna Conference** did not go unnoticed in Washington. At a time when the White House wants to ignore Afghanistan and forget about the disaster that unfolded there in 2021, the US Congress has been making efforts to hold the White House accountable. Releasing a statement on Twitter, the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Rep. Mike McCaul, wrote: “I commend the efforts of anti-Taliban forces to unite in opposition to Taliban oppression, especially oppression perpetrated against Afghan women and girls and Afghan allies of the United States.” The latest conference should be considered the beginning of a new “**Vienna process**” that can serve as a platform for international engagement with Afghan opposition groups that have been marginalized and persecuted by the Taliban regime. In the same way the Taliban was allowed to use Doha to engage diplomatically on the international stage, leaders of the various opposition groups in Afghanistan should use Vienna. Such engagement could help policymakers to learn more about the groups opposing the Taliban, their goals and their needs. After all, if members of the international community are comfortable engaging with the Taliban, there is no reason they cannot do the same with the National Resistance Front or other opposition groups.

The international community should allocate a percentage of the frozen assets of Afghanistan’s central bank to help support and fund the Vienna process. For example, the US currently holds about \$7 billion of these frozen funds. American policymakers should explore legal ways to divert some of them to the group’s political office in Vienna. Washington’s partners should follow suit. Only a tiny percentage of these funds would be needed to help establish an enduring Vienna process but the result could be significant.

In parallel, there should be a global refusal to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. The Taliban would benefit from such legitimacy and the international community should do everything it can to prevent this. At least 13 members of the Taliban’s so-called government are under some form of UN sanctions. There is **no meaningful non-Pashtun representation in the Taliban government**. Under these circumstances alone, it is inconceivable that the Taliban can be viewed as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan.

It is too early to tell what long-term impact the second meeting in Vienna will have on the future of Afghanistan. But one thing is for certain: More than 20 months after the Taliban took over the country, the various groups opposed to Taliban rule have never been more mobilized. All the participants in Vienna pledged to continue cooperating with one another, so it is only a matter of time before the next gathering takes place.

At the same time the Taliban continue to find it increasingly difficult to govern the country, opposition movements are finding it increasingly easy to mobilize. **Keep an eye on the Vienna process.**

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