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Episode #046

The Taliban

April 21, 2020



[00:00:03] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to yet another episode of English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to fascinating stories and learn interesting things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:22] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to talk about the Taliban.

[00:00:29] Now you probably know a bit about the Taliban.

[00:00:33] When you hear the term 'the Taliban', you might imagine all sorts of things - the war in Afghanistan, terrorists, [Shariah law](#)¹, men with big beards and [rocket launchers](#)² hiding in caves.

¹ a religious law forming part of the Islamic tradition. It is derived from the religious precepts of Islam, particularly the Quran and the hadith

² a device that sends something such as a rocket or a missile into the air with force



The Taliban

[00:00:49] While these are not necessarily incorrect, in this episode we are going to go a little deeper.

[00:00:57] We'll explain who the Taliban are, how they came to be, how they manage to [seize](#)³ power, how they have never really lost power, and we'll end with a few ideas about what the future might look like for the Taliban.

[00:01:16] And in the next 20 minutes or so I'm confident that you'll [emerge](#)⁴ with a much better idea, and a much more [rounded](#)⁵ understanding of a group that has had a huge impact on the [balance of power](#)⁶ in the region and the world more widely.

[00:01:35] But before we get right into it this is my chance to remind those of you who haven't yet [seen the light](#)⁷, that you can grab a copy of the transcript and key vocabulary for the podcast over on the website, which is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:52] If you are wanting to improve your English listening skills, then there aren't many better ways than to listen to a podcast with the transcript in front of you and having the key vocabulary there means that you can build up your vocabulary at the same time as listening to the podcast.

³ to take something quickly and keep or hold it

⁴ to come to the end of a difficult period or experience

⁵ balanced

⁶ a position in which both or all of the groups or people involved, usually in a political situation, have equal power

⁷ If you see the light, you suddenly understand something you didn't understand before



The Taliban

[00:02:11] So go and check that out. It is at leonardoenglish.com.

[00:02:18] Right then, the Taliban.

[00:02:21] To get one small point out of the way before we start: this is obviously not some kind of advert or [endorsement](#)⁸ of the Taliban.

[00:02:31] They are a nasty group with some views that this podcast certainly doesn't [condone](#)⁹, doesn't agree with.

[00:02:39] But just because you don't agree with something, it doesn't mean that you shouldn't learn about it and just thinking that something is bad without properly understanding it and the circumstances that have allowed it to [flourish](#)¹⁰ is certainly not something that we would encourage.

[00:02:59] So that's why we are taking on the Taliban, taking on at least from an informational point of view.

[00:03:08] Let's start with a linguistic point, as this is after all, a podcast about improving your language skills.

[00:03:17] The Taliban means 'students' in Pashto, one of the two official languages of Afghanistan.

⁸ the act of saying that you approve of or support something or someone

⁹ to accept or allow behaviour that is wrong

¹⁰ to grow or develop successfully



The Taliban

[00:03:27] The group came to power in Afghanistan after the Afghan civil war.

[00:03:32] And from 1996 to 2001 they held power over about three quarters of the whole of Afghanistan.

[00:03:42] After the Americans invaded Afghanistan in 2001, after the September the 11th attacks, the Taliban lost power, at least from a governmental point of view.

[00:03:54] But slowly, slowly in the almost 20 years since the Americans first invaded, the Taliban have been regaining power.

[00:04:06] By 2016 it was estimated that the Taliban held about 20% of Afghanistan, and even in 2019 President Trump had said that he was planning to invite the Taliban to Camp David, the US presidential [retreat¹¹](#).

[00:04:26] So this group has never really disappeared and has been [lurking¹²](#) in the shadows, hiding in the shadows, a constant presence in the country and the region more widely.

[00:04:41] Afghanistan is a hugely interesting country with a fascinating past.

¹¹ a private and safe place

¹² a lurking person or animal is waiting where he, she, or it cannot be seen, usually waiting to attack or do something bad



The Taliban

[00:04:48] So it's [tricky](#)¹³ to explain everything in one short, 20 minute podcast, but let's talk about some of the main factors that help us understand the how, the who, the what, and the why of the Taliban.

[00:05:07] Firstly, how did the Taliban [seize](#) power and who exactly are they?

[00:05:15] Well, as it often is, the Cold War was a big factor here.

[00:05:21] Afghanistan was one of the countries where the [proxy](#)¹⁴ war between the Soviet Union and the United States was fought.

[00:05:31] The Soviet Union, the USSR, wanted to support the failing communist government and sent in [troops](#)¹⁵ to the country to [prop it up](#)¹⁶, to support it.

[00:05:44] This started the Afghanistan war, which ran from 1979 to 1989, with the Americans secretly supporting the [Mujaheddin](#)¹⁷, the jihadists who were fighting against the Russians.

¹³ If a piece of work or problem is tricky, it is difficult to deal with and needs careful attention or skill

¹⁴ authority given to a person to act for someone else, such as by voting for them in an election, or the person who this authority is given to

¹⁵ soldiers

¹⁶ to support something

¹⁷ fundamentalist Muslim guerrillas; in Afghanistan in 1992 the mujaheddin overthrew the government but were unable to agree on a constitution due to factional conflict and in 1996 Taliban forces seized power



The Taliban

[00:06:02] [Long story short](#)¹⁸, after 10 years of fighting, then after the Russians left, five more years of [mismanagement](#)¹⁹ by the new rulers, and civil war, the Taliban managed to [seize](#) power.

[00:06:19] They proposed [stability](#)²⁰, [stamping out](#)²¹ corruption, and ensuring the rule of law, which, for a country that had been [deeply](#)²² [lawless](#)²³ and under a state of foreign occupation and civil war for a lot of recent living memory, that was understandably quite an attractive [proposition](#)²⁴.

[00:06:46] But with this rule of law came a lot more, the Taliban came with lots of [strings attached](#)²⁵.

[00:06:57] The Taliban, as I said, meaning 'the students', had [emerged](#) from the [madrassas](#)²⁶, the religious schools in southern Afghanistan and also Pakistan.

¹⁸ used when you do not tell all the details

¹⁹ the process of organising or controlling something badly

²⁰ a situation in which something is not likely to move or change

²¹ to get rid of something that is wrong or harmful

²² extremely or strongly

²³ not controlled by laws, or illegal

²⁴ an offer or suggestion, usually in business

²⁵ If something such as an agreement has strings attached, it involves special demands or limits

²⁶ schools where people go to learn about the religion of Islam



The Taliban

[00:07:09] They followed and [enforced](#)²⁷ a very strict version of [Shariah law](#), and introduced punishments like public executions of [convicted](#)²⁸ murderers and adulterers, and [amputations](#)²⁹, the cutting off of hands and feet for those found guilty of theft, of stealing.

[00:07:34] Men had to grow beards and women had to wear [burqas](#)³⁰, the dress that covers their entire body.

[00:07:43] And TV, cinema, lots of music, it was all [banned](#)³¹.

[00:07:49] And it was a deeply [chauvinistic](#)³² society that they were trying to create.

[00:07:55] As you probably know, women were treated horribly, girls were forbidden from getting a proper education.

²⁷ to make people obey a law, or to make a particular situation happen or be accepted

²⁸ having officially been found guilty of a crime in a law court

²⁹ cutting off of part of the body

³⁰ a piece of clothing that covers the whole head and body, with a hole for the eyes, worn by some Muslim women

³¹ forbidden

³² believing that or behaving as if women are naturally less important, intelligent, or able than men



The Taliban

[00:08:06] Obviously, these are things that most people across the world now would consider pretty [barbaric](#)³³ and [inhumane](#)³⁴ and things that civilisations in lots of the rest of the world stopped thinking were acceptable several centuries ago.

[00:08:26] And despite people in the West who knew about what was going on in Afghanistan being quite [horrified](#)³⁵ about the behaviour that they saw on display from the Taliban, there was not really a huge amount that was done to stop it.

[00:08:47] These things were going on within Afghanistan, to the Afghan people, and despite the fact that another country didn't agree with it, there was little that they could actually do about it.

[00:09:02] And there were also a few complications relating to international diplomacy, international relations, with the Taliban and with Afghanistan.

[00:09:14] Firstly, the Taliban government of Afghanistan was only recognised by three countries.

[00:09:24] Can you guess which they might be and why they would have recognised it?

³³ extremely cruel and unpleasant

³⁴ cruel and causing suffering to people or animals

³⁵ very shocked



The Taliban

[00:09:31] Well, it was naturally the countries that had the most to [gain](#)³⁶ by supporting Afghanistan, the ones that wanted to keep The Taliban government friendly because of the other regional [rivalries](#)³⁷.

[00:09:47] So firstly, their neighbour, Pakistan, which is actually where it's thought that a lot of the Taliban studied.

[00:09:57] Then also Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the United Arab Emirates, who were very keen to have an influence in the region, especially if it meant being able to influence things with their mutual local rival, [archrival](#)³⁸, Iran.

[00:10:15] In any case, the rule of the Taliban, despite being evidently pretty [barbaric](#) was largely ignored by Western powers.

[00:10:28] Afghans, as a generalisation, suffered greatly under the Taliban rule in the nineties, especially the female population.

[00:10:39] It truly did seem like a [throwback](#)³⁹ to the [Middle Ages](#)⁴⁰.

³⁶ benefit, or get an advantage

³⁷ a situation in which people, businesses, etc. compete with each other for the same thing

³⁸ the chief rival of a person, team, or group

³⁹ a person or thing that is similar to an earlier type

⁴⁰ a period in European history, between about AD 1000 and AD 1500, when the power of kings, people of high rank, and the Christian Church was strong



The Taliban

[00:10:45] But in 2001 things all changed again, and Afghanistan was thrown back into a state of war.

[00:10:55] However, this time it wasn't because of the terrible things that the Taliban were doing to its own people or the general [barbarity](#)⁴¹ of the regime.

[00:11:07] This was [tolerated](#)⁴² by other world powers.

[00:11:12] It was, technically at least, only because the Taliban had [harboured](#)⁴³, they had hidden, the Saudi, Osama Bin Laden, who you will know as the [architect](#)⁴⁴ behind the September 11th attacks.

[00:11:28] And when the US invaded Afghanistan, less than a month after September the 11th, the Taliban [were no match](#)⁴⁵ for the well trained and well equipped US army.

[00:11:42] The Taliban government fell within a week of the invasion, at least they fell from official power, but as I'm sure you know, just because a group isn't officially in power, it doesn't mean that they have lost all their power.

⁴¹ behaviour that is very cruel, or a very cruel act

⁴² to accept behaviour and beliefs that are different from your own, although you might not agree with or approve of them

⁴³ to protect someone or something bad, especially by hiding that person or thing when the police are looking for him, her, or it

⁴⁴ the person behind, the mastermind

⁴⁵ were no competition



The Taliban

[00:12:00] The senior leaders [went to the ground](#)⁴⁶, they went into hiding, and many weren't captured for many years.

[00:12:09] Lots returned, [reportedly](#)⁴⁷, I should say, to the Pakistani city of Quetta, and they managed things remotely from there.

[00:12:21] And as the British found when they went to war in Afghanistan in the 19th century, and as the Soviets found when they went to war in Afghanistan in the 20th century, the Americans were also to find that Afghanistan is not an easy place to win a war when they went there in the 21st century.

[00:12:44] The combination of a difficult landscape and different cultural and [ethnic](#)⁴⁸ groups mean that fighting in Afghanistan is [fraught](#)⁴⁹ with difficulties, it's filled with lots of difficult aspects.

[00:13:01] And how this helps the Taliban is of course, that they have a big advantage over any invaders.

⁴⁶ went into hiding

⁴⁷ according to what many people say

⁴⁸ relating to a particular race of people

⁴⁹ full of unpleasant things such as problems or dangers



The Taliban

[00:13:10] They know the [terrain](#)⁵⁰, they know the geography, and they know the cultural and [ethnic](#) differences and how to manage them, at least better than any invader would.

[00:13:23] The other advantage that the Taliban had over the Americans and the NATO forces, and the advantage that they still have in fact, was, and still is time.

[00:13:38] They could afford to wait.

[00:13:41] They could [bide their time](#)⁵¹ and continually attack the invading troops from the shadows with bombs, suicide attacks, and other classic terrorist activities.

[00:13:54] And this is exactly what has been going on off and on ever since the Americans first put [boots on the ground](#)⁵² in Afghanistan in October, 2001.

[00:14:08] The Taliban can continue to fight and continue to wait it out, partly because they are very well financed, they are a group with quite a lot of money.

[00:14:19] It's thought that they make as much as one and a half billion dollars a year.

[00:14:25] A large part of this is through drugs: heroin, and [opium](#)⁵³.

⁵⁰ an area of land, when considering its natural features

⁵¹ to wait patiently

⁵² soldiers, police, etc. who are physically present somewhere in a military or police operation

⁵³ a drug made from the seeds of a poppy (= redflower) that is used to control pain or to help people sleep . It can make a person who takes it want more of it and is sometimes used by people as an illegal drug for pleasure



The Taliban

[00:14:32] If you weren't aware, Afghanistan is the world's largest [opium](#) producer.

[00:14:38] Over 90% of the world's [opium](#) comes from Afghanistan, and most of the [opium](#) growing areas are held by the Taliban, or at least the Taliban can [extract](#)⁵⁴ some kind of taxes, money, from the [opium](#) farmers.

[00:14:57] So this is obviously a super [lucrative](#)⁵⁵ source of income for the group.

[00:15:05] The great [irony](#)⁵⁶ here is that some of the Taliban's biggest markets and biggest customers are the drug addicts, the citizens of countries that have invaded them.

[00:15:19] The war on drugs is definitely a topic for another podcast, but if you are thinking about the flow of money, specifically related to the Taliban, the Taliban produces drugs that are consumed by people all over the world, but a large part are consumed by Americans and there is actually a double cost for the US for this: both the cost that heroin addiction has on US society, and the fact that American customers are helping keep the Taliban in business, helping finance the Taliban.

[00:15:59] But as I said, we'll go into that in more detail another day.

⁵⁴ to remove or take out something

⁵⁵ (especially of a business, job, or activity) producing a lot of money

⁵⁶ a situation in which something which was intended to have a particular result has the opposite or a very different result



The Taliban

[00:16:05] So the Taliban has continued to be a well-financed group operating from the shadows and [biding their time](#) and time was, and is, on their side.

[00:16:20] Of course, American and NATO [troops](#) couldn't stay forever.

[00:16:26] NATO announced that it was pulling troops out of Afghanistan in 2014 and since then the number of foreign troops based in the country has been going down and down almost every year.

[00:16:42] From a political point of view in the West, in America, and in Europe, the war in Afghanistan is generally relatively unpopular, and of course has been hugely expensive.

[00:16:58] It's thought that it has cost the US almost a trillion dollars.

[00:17:04] And the Taliban knows this.

[00:17:06] It is sitting, waiting, gradually [regaining](#)⁵⁷ territory, continuing attacks [from the sidelines](#)⁵⁸, knowing that unless it does something that really [aggravates](#)⁵⁹ the US, which it would be pretty foolish to do, then it's unlikely that the US will send any more [troops](#) to the country.

⁵⁷ to take or get possession of something again

⁵⁸ If you are on the sidelines or do something from the sidelines, you are not actively involved in something

⁵⁹ to make a bad situation worse



The Taliban

[00:17:28] And despite the fact that the Taliban isn't officially in power in the country, and it is still sort of a [fringe](#)⁶⁰ movement, a [sideline](#)⁶¹ group, experts say that it's now stronger than at any point since 2001.

[00:17:48] It's thought to have 60,000 full time soldiers and to be in control of just under 20% of the administrative regions.

[00:18:00] It's clear that the Taliban isn't just going to disappear, and this has meant that politicians both within Afghanistan and abroad have had to actively [engage with](#)⁶² it.

[00:18:16] Afghans have accepted this too.

[00:18:19] A survey last year found that 64% of people said that some sort of agreement with the Taliban was possible and what was needed to move the country forward.

[00:18:33] And then in February of this year, of 2020, the US and the Taliban signed an agreement to try to end the war that's been going on for almost 20 years, and to find a path towards peace.

⁶⁰ the outer or less important part of an area, group, or activity

⁶¹ something on the periphery, not a mainstream thing

⁶² deal with something, take part in something



The Taliban

[00:18:51] [Skeptics](#)⁶³ say that this is just a [cynical](#)⁶⁴ [ploy](#)⁶⁵, a trick, from the Taliban to push the US out of the country and bring things back to how they were when they first took power.

[00:19:06] And the fact that it's clear that the Taliban want to [establish](#)⁶⁶ an Islamic Republic and [abolish](#)⁶⁷ the current system of [universal suffrage](#)⁶⁸, where everyone gets a vote, this is clearly something that is quite scary to lots of Western leaders who have ISIS in relatively recent living memory.

[00:19:32] So what is next for the Taliban?

[00:19:37] Well, with the world currently [grappling](#)⁶⁹ with a global health problem, and attentions certainly [diverted](#)⁷⁰ away from the region, most experts imagine that the Taliban will be [plotting](#)⁷¹ their next move, but whether that is something more active or it's just 'sit and wait', well, I think that is anyone's guess.

⁶³ a person who doubts the truth or value of an idea or belief

⁶⁴ believing that people are only interested in themselves and are not sincere

⁶⁵ something that is done or said in order to get an advantage, often dishonestly

⁶⁶ to start a company or organisation that will continue for a long time

⁶⁷ to end an activity or custom officially

⁶⁸ the right for everyone to vote

⁶⁹ to fight, especially in order to win something

⁷⁰ to cause something or someone to change direction

⁷¹ making a secret plan



The Taliban

[00:20:05] Okay then that is it for the Taliban.

[00:20:10] Obviously it is a barbaric group that has done many [abhorrent⁷²](#) things, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to understand more about it.

[00:20:20] So I hope that this 20 minute or so introduction has been [enlightening⁷³](#).

[00:20:27] I've also got a few little pieces of news for you and some reminders.

[00:20:32] Firstly, if you are a Spanish or Portuguese speaker, you're in luck because the Leonardo English website is now available in Spanish and Portuguese.

[00:20:43] Just go to leonardoenglish.com there's a little language switcher button in there and you can switch everything over to Spanish or Portuguese.

[00:20:54] And we will of course have more languages coming soon.

[00:20:58] We also have a load of new interesting blogs and guides on the website. Things like how to create your own immersion English course or why you shouldn't learn English in the classroom, which is 'a confessions from an English teacher' article.

[00:21:14] So go and check those out, those are well worth a read.

[00:21:18] And as you probably already know, the website is where you can find the transcript and key vocabulary for all of the podcasts and also all the bonus episodes.

⁷² hateful

⁷³ giving you more information about something



[00:21:28] So if you haven't checked those out already, then that is definitely worth having a look.

[00:21:35] And final, final point is if you are listening to this on your favourite podcast app, then make sure you hit that subscribe or follow button to get it zooming into your podcast app of choice every Tuesday and Friday.

[00:21:50] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:21:56] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]



Key vocabulary

Word

Definition

Shariah law

a religious law forming part of the Islamic tradition. It is derived from the religious precepts of Islam, particularly the Quran and the hadith

Rocket launcher

a device that sends something such as a rocket or a missile into the air with force

Seize

to take something quickly and keep or hold it

Emerge

to come to the end of a difficult period or experience

Rounded

balanced

Balance of power

a position in which both or all of the groups or people involved, usually in a political situation, have equal power

Seen the light

If you see the light, you suddenly understand something you didn't understand before

Endorsement

the act of saying that you approve of or support something or someone

Condone

to accept or allow behaviour that is wrong

Flourish

to grow or develop successfully



The Taliban

Retreat	a private and safe place
Lurking	a lurking person or animal is waiting where he, she, or it cannot be seen, usually waiting to attack or do something bad
Tricky	If a piece of work or problem is tricky, it is difficult to deal with and needs careful attention or skill
Proxy	authority given to a person to act for someone else, such as by voting for them in an election, or the person who this authority is given to
Troops	soldiers
Prop it up	to support something
Mujaheddin	fundamentalist Muslim guerrillas; in Afghanistan in 1992 the mujaheddin overthrew the government but were unable to agree on a constitution due to factional conflict and in 1996 Taliban forces seized power
Long story short	used when you do not tell all the details
Mismanagement	the process of organising or controlling something badly
Stability	a situation in which something is not likely to move or change
Stamping out	to get rid of something that is wrong or harmful



The Taliban

Deeply	extremely or strongly
Lawless	not controlled by laws, or illegal
Proposition	an offer or suggestion, usually in business
Strings attached	If something such as an agreement has strings attached, it involves special demands or limits
Madrassas	schools where people go to learn about the religion of Islam
Enforced	to make people obey a law, or to make a particular situation happen or be accepted
Convicted	having officially been found guilty of a crime in a law court
Amputations	cutting off of part of the body
Burqas	a piece of clothing that covers the whole head and body, with a hole for the eyes, worn by some Muslim women
Banned	forbidden
Chauvinistic	believing that or behaving as if women are naturally less important, intelligent, or able than men
Barbaric	extremely cruel and unpleasant
Inhumane	cruel and causing suffering to people or animals



The Taliban

Horrificed	very shocked
Gain	benefit, or get an advantage
Rivalries	a situation in which people, businesses, etc. compete with each other for the same thing
Archrival	the chief rival of a person, team, or group
Throwback	a person or thing that is similar to an earlier type
Middle ages	a period in European history, between about AD 1000 and AD 1500, when the power of kings, people of high rank, and the Christian Church was strong
Barbarity	behaviour that is very cruel, or a very cruel act
Tolerated	to accept behaviour and beliefs that are different from your own, although you might not agree with or approve of them
Harboured	to protect someone or something bad, especially by hiding that person or thing when the police are looking for him, her, or it
Architect	the person behind, the mastermind
Were no match	were no competition
Went to the ground	went into hiding



The Taliban

Reportedly	according to what many people say
Ethnic	relating to a particular race of people
Fraught	full of unpleasant things such as problems or dangers
Terrain	an area of land, when considering its natural features
Bide their time	to wait patiently
Boots on the ground	soldiers, police, etc. who are physically present somewhere in a military or police operation
Opium	a drug made from the seeds of a poppy (= redflower) that is used to control pain or to help people sleep . It can make a person who takes it want more of it and is sometimes used by people as an illegal drug for pleasure
Extract	to remove or take out something
Lucrative	(especially of a business, job, or activity) producing a lot of money
Irony	a situation in which something which was intended to have a particular result has the opposite or a very different result
Regaining	to take or get possession of something again
From the sidelines	If you are on the sidelines or do something from the sidelines, you are



The Taliban

not actively involved in something

Aggravates

to make a bad situation worse

Fringe

the outer or less important part of an area, group, or activity

Sideline

something on the periphery, not a mainstream thing

Engage with

deal with something, take part in something

Skeptics

a person who doubts the truth or value of an idea or belief

Cynical

believing that people are only interested in themselves and are not sincere

Ploy

something that is done or said in order to get an advantage, often dishonestly

Establish

to start a company or organisation that will continue for a long time

Abolish

to end an activity or custom officially

Universal suffrage

the right for everyone to vote

Grappling

to fight, especially in order to win something

Diverted

to cause something or someone to change direction

Plotting

making a secret plan



The Taliban

Abhorrent

hateful

Enlightening

giving you more information about something

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

You can email us at hi@leonardoenglish.com.

