

Islamic Governance As Foreign Policy Identity: International Engagement in Post-2021 Afghanistan

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Abstract

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The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021 created a significant puzzle in International Relations. Although it exercises effective political authority, most states continue to withhold formal recognition while maintaining diplomatic, humanitarian, security, and limited economic engagement. This paper examines how Islamic governance becomes relevant to international engagement under conditions of contested legitimacy in post-2021 Afghanistan. Using a conceptual approach, it integrates governance identity, norm contestation, identity-based signaling, and recognition practices, with Afghanistan serving as an illustrative case. The analysis suggests that Islamic governance does not independently determine recognition, isolation, or cooperation. Its international significance emerges when the Taliban's religiously grounded legitimacy claims are communicated through institutions, policies, and official discourse and interpreted by external actors according to their normative commitments, humanitarian priorities, security concerns, and strategic interests. These differing interpretations produce calibrated engagement, whereby practical interaction continues despite the absence of formal recognition. The paper concludes that Islamic governance functions as a foreign policy identity by shaping the interpretation, justification, and limits of engagement rather than directly determining international responses. Future research should examine the framework comparatively and empirically across other contested governing authorities.

Keywords: Islamic governance; foreign policy identity; Taliban; international engagement; contested legitimacy

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Afghanistan has become a significant case for understanding how the international community engages with a governing authority

whose political legitimacy is explicitly grounded in Islamic principles while remaining internationally contested. Although the Taliban exercises effective control over Afghanistan's territory and principal governing institutions, broad formal international recognition has not followed. At the same time, the absence of recognition has not resulted in complete international isolation. Diplomatic contacts, humanitarian coordination, security-related communication, and other forms of practical engagement have continued. This apparent tension between non-recognition and continued interaction raises an important question: how does Islamic governance shape international engagement under conditions of contested legitimacy?

Previous studies on religion, identity, and Islamic governance further suggests insights into this puzzle but does not fully explain how governance identity shapes international engagement under conditions of contested legitimacy. Studies on norm contestation argue that the contemporary international system is characterized by competing standards of political legitimacy rather than a single uncontested normative order. States and political authorities increasingly advance different understandings of sovereignty, governance, and legitimate political authority, allowing non-liberal political systems to coexist with dominant international norms without necessarily becoming completely excluded from international interaction (Acharya, 2018; Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021; Aydin-Düzgit & Noutcheva, 2022). While this perspective explains the broader normative environment surrounding contested governments, it provides less insight into how the specific identity of a governing authority shapes external interpretations of engagement.

Related studies on recognition have similarly moved beyond the traditional distinction between recognized and unrecognized governments. Recent studies demonstrate that international recognition is often expressed through diplomatic contacts, humanitarian coordination, economic cooperation, and technical interaction that acknowledge effective authority without conferring formal political recognition (Grzybowski, 2019; Newman & Visoka, 2018). This recognition-as-practice perspective helps explain why engagement may continue despite the absence of formal recognition. However, it pays relatively limited attention to why different external actors interpret and justify engagement with the same contested authority in different ways.

Studies on religion, identity, and Islamic governance further suggests that religious ideas can shape political legitimacy, institutional authority, and diplomatic narratives (Channak, 2026; Mostofa et al., 2024; Ahmed et al., 2025). Research on Islamic governance demonstrates that religiously grounded claims to political authority influence both domestic political organization and external perceptions of governance. Nevertheless, this literature has largely concentrated on domestic legitimacy and ideological orientation, leaving comparatively little attention to how Islamic governance functions as an externally interpreted political identity that shapes patterns of international engagement.

These perspectives illuminate important dimensions of the Afghan case but remain insufficiently integrated. Existing studies explain competing legitimacy standards, practical engagement without formal recognition, and the political significance of Islamic governance. However, they do not adequately explain how these processes interact to shape international engagement with a contested governing authority. Consequently, the relationship between Islamic governance identity, external interpretation, recognition practices, and international engagement remains conceptually underdeveloped.

This paper addresses the question of how Islamic governance, understood as a foreign policy identity, shapes patterns of international engagement under conditions of contested legitimacy in post-2021 Afghanistan. Rather than proposing a deterministic relationship between Islamic governance and international responses, the paper examines how governance identity interacts with external interpretation and recognition practices in shaping

engagement. Using post-2021 Afghanistan as an illustrative case, the paper develops a conceptual framework that explains why practical engagement may continue despite the absence of formal political recognition.

2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding how Islamic governance becomes relevant to international engagement requires an analytical framework that connects governance identity, norm contestation, identity-based signaling, and recognition practices. Rather than assuming that Islamic governance produces a predetermined international response, the framework examines how religiously grounded claims to political legitimacy acquire political significance through their interpretation by external actors. International engagement is therefore understood as the product of interactions between governance identity and the broader normative and practical environment.

Norm contestation provides the first component of the framework. Contemporary international relations are characterized by competing understandings of political legitimacy rather than a single uncontested normative order. Liberal principles of representative government, political inclusion, and human rights coexist with alternative conceptions emphasizing sovereignty, political stability, religious authority, national autonomy, and non-interference (Acharya, 2018; Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021; Aydın-Düzgit & Noutcheva, 2022). Contested governments may therefore encounter different forms of international acceptance or resistance depending on how their legitimacy claims interact with these competing normative standards.

Within this context, Islamic governance is treated as a particular form of governance identity. Its analytical importance does not rest on the assumption that Islamic political authority is inherently more contested than military, revolutionary, secular-authoritarian, or other non-liberal forms of rule. Similar patterns of contested legitimacy may arise in all these contexts. What makes Islam analytically relevant in the Afghan case is that the Taliban explicitly invokes its interpretation of Islamic authority to define the legitimacy, institutional character, and policy direction of the Islamic Emirate. Religious legitimacy is therefore not merely an external label applied to the Taliban but an integral element of its political identity and justification of rule.

The framework consequently does not treat Islamic governance as an independent or sufficient cause of recognition, isolation, or cooperation. Instead, it examines when and how the religious basis of Taliban authority becomes internationally consequential. This occurs when Islamic legitimacy claims are expressed through official discourse, institutional arrangements, public policies, diplomatic conduct, and symbolic practices, and are subsequently interpreted by external actors. Islam is therefore relevant not simply because the Taliban identifies its government as Islamic, but because Islamic claims generate identifiable political signals whose effects depend on the normative commitments and practical interests of international audiences.

In this sense, Islamic governance functions as a foreign policy identity. As a domestic political arrangement, it concerns the institutions, policies, and legitimacy claims through which authority is exercised internally. It acquires foreign policy significance when those same principles and practices shape how external actors interpret the Taliban and justify their relations with it. Islamic governance therefore influences the political meaning attached to engagement without automatically determining its outcome.

The second component of the framework is identity-based signaling. Political authorities communicate their governing identity through official statements, institutional arrangements, policy decisions, diplomatic behavior, and symbolic practices. In Afghanistan, the Taliban's use of the term *Islamic Emirate*, its emphasis on Sharia-based governance, and its religious justification of political authority communicate a particular understanding of legitimate political

order. These signals may be directed toward both domestic constituencies and international audiences, but their meanings are not interpreted uniformly.

Signaling is therefore understood as a relational process. Governance signals acquire international significance through the interaction between the message communicated by the governing authority and the interpretive framework of the external audience. The same Taliban policy may generate different responses from different actors. Governments emphasizing human rights, gender equality, and political inclusion may interpret Taliban practices as evidence of normative incompatibility. By contrast, actors prioritizing sovereignty, regional stability, counterterrorism, political order, or non-interference may attach greater importance to the Taliban's effective control and capacity to meet practical commitments. Identity-based signaling thus helps structure international responses without mechanically producing them.

The third component concerns recognition practices. Recognition in international relations is not limited to a formal legal or diplomatic decision. Governments and international institutions may interact with contested authorities through diplomatic meetings, humanitarian coordination, economic exchanges, technical cooperation, security dialogue, and mediated negotiations while continuing to withhold formal recognition (Bouris & Kyris, 2017; Grzybowski, 2019; Ker-Lindsay, 2015). These practices create an intermediate space between complete isolation and full diplomatic acceptance.

Post-2021 Afghanistan illustrates this condition particularly clearly. Although the Taliban has not received broad formal recognition, external actors continue to communicate with its officials, coordinate humanitarian assistance, participate in diplomatic discussions, and engage on security and economic matters (Hasar, 2024; Munadi & Mena, 2023; Strand & Suhrke, 2021). The expression "recognition without recognition" is used here as analytical shorthand for this intermediate condition. It does not constitute a new legal category. Rather, it refers to the practical acknowledgment of effective governing authority for specific purposes while the political and legal implications of formal recognition remain deliberately withheld.

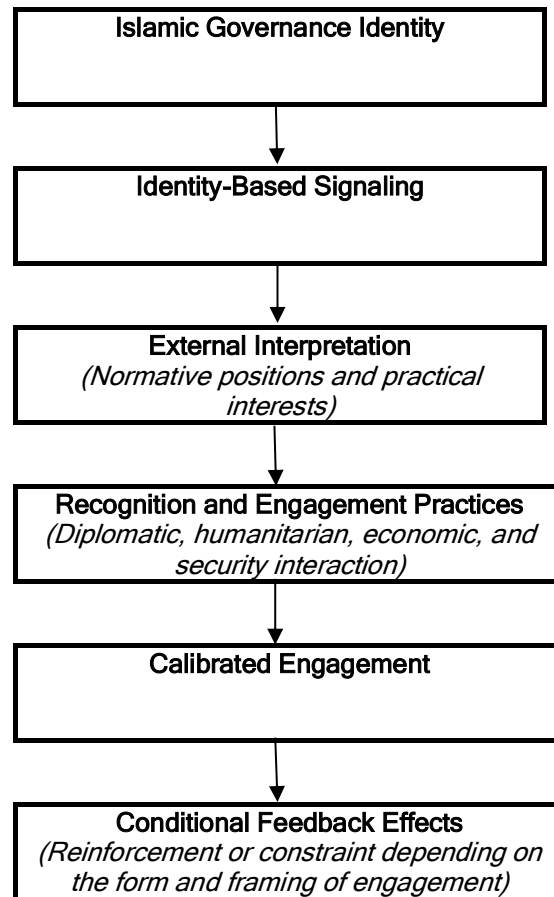
Bringing these components together, the framework conceptualizes international engagement as the outcome of interactions between governance identity, identity signaling, external interpretation, and recognition practices. The Taliban communicates a religiously grounded governance identity through its discourse, institutions, and policies. External actors interpret these signals through their own normative positions and practical interests (Mosamim & Villeneuve, 2026; Žotkevičiūtė Banevičienė, 2025). These interpretations then shape the scope, form, and political framing of engagement, ranging from narrowly technical interaction to sustained functional cooperation despite continuing disagreement over legitimacy.

The framework also recognizes that engagement is conditional. Humanitarian necessity, regional stability, security cooperation, and strategic interests may encourage interaction even where serious normative disagreements persist. Conversely, concerns relating to human rights, gender equality, political inclusion, and legitimacy may limit the scope or symbolism of engagement. The resulting pattern is therefore one of calibrated engagement, in which practical cooperation coexists with continuing political and normative distance.

Repeated engagement may also produce conditional feedback effects. Regular and institutionalized interaction may strengthen the Taliban's position as an unavoidable governing interlocutor. However, engagement may also constrain its international position when contact remains narrowly functional, explicitly conditional, or linked to demands for changes in governance practices. The political effect of engagement therefore depends on its form, purpose, and framing rather than on the mere occurrence of diplomatic contact.

The framework has limited explanatory value where international engagement is driven primarily by material coercion, alliance obligations, geographical proximity, or immediate security necessity, with little reference to the governing authority's identity or legitimacy claims.

It is most useful where external actors explicitly interpret, justify, expand, or restrict engagement by reference to the authority's governing principles, institutional practices, and claims to legitimacy. The framework therefore does not seek to explain all foreign policy behaviour toward Afghanistan, but only those patterns in which governance identity becomes politically salient. Figure 1 presents the framework on Islamic Governance as Foreign Policy Identity.



The figure 1 : Islamic Governance as Foreign Policy Identity
Source: Authors' conceptualization, 2026

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a conceptual research approach to examine how Islamic governance shapes international engagement under conditions of contested legitimacy. The conceptual analysis draws primarily on peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and book chapters addressing governance identity, international recognition, norm contestation, religion, and political Islam. To illustrate the framework in the context of post-2021 Afghanistan, the paper also consults official statements, policy documents, reports from international organizations, and other publicly available institutional materials concerning diplomatic, humanitarian, security, and economic engagement with the Taliban.

The Post-2021 Afghanistan is used as an analytical approach because it combines effective territorial authority with contested international legitimacy. The materials are interpreted conceptually to clarify how Taliban governance signals are understood by external actors and how these interpretations shape recognition practices and patterns of engagement.

They are used to demonstrate the applicability of the framework rather than to produce original empirical findings or statistically generalizable conclusions.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Reading post-2021 Afghanistan through the proposed framework reveals that international engagement with the Taliban cannot be adequately understood as a simple choice between recognition and isolation. The Afghan case instead demonstrates a relational process in which Islamic governance claims generate political signals, external actors interpret those signals through different normative and strategic perspectives, and these interpretations shape the scope and form of engagement. The analysis is therefore organized around four connected dimensions: Islamic governance as an interpreted identity, practical engagement without formal recognition, the conditions shaping calibrated engagement, and the feedback effects and limits of normalization.

4.1 Islamic Governance as an Interpreted Political Identity

Following its return to power in August 2021, the Taliban re-established the Islamic Emirate and explicitly presented its authority as grounded in its interpretation of Islamic principles. This legitimacy claim is communicated through official discourse, institutional arrangements, legal regulations, public policies, and the use of religious terminology to define the political order. Islamic governance therefore operates not only as a domestic system of rule but also as an identity signal through which external actors assess the character, legitimacy, and expected conduct of the Taliban government.

The international consequences of this identity arise through interpretation rather than from Islamic governance itself. Taliban policies concerning women's education, employment, political participation, judicial administration, and the institutional organization of the Islamic Emirate communicate a particular understanding of legitimate authority (Popalzay, 2026; Sahill, 2023). External actors, however, do not assign a uniform meaning to these policies.

Many Western governments and international organizations interpret restrictions affecting women and girls through established norms concerning human rights, gender equality, and inclusive governance. From this perspective, these policies indicate normative incompatibility and remain major obstacles to formal recognition and political normalization. Islamic governance becomes internationally significant because its institutional expression is evaluated against these normative standards.

Regional actors often interpret the same political order through a wider combination of considerations. Governments such as China, Pakistan, Iran, India, Qatar, and several Central Asian states have maintained different forms of communication and cooperation with the Taliban while avoiding unconditional endorsement of its domestic policies (Ali, 2022; Ryan Teston et al., 2021). Their engagement is shaped not only by governance concerns but also by border security, counterterrorism, regional stability, trade, migration, economic connectivity, and principles of sovereignty and non-interference. China's approach, for example, combines diplomatic contact and economic interests with concerns about militant activity and regional instability (Badad, 2025).

The Afghan case therefore demonstrates an interpretive asymmetry. The Taliban presents a comparatively consistent claim that its authority is legitimate because it is Islamic, but external actors assign different political meanings to that claim. Some interpret Islamic governance primarily as evidence of ideological rigidity and normative divergence. Others regard it as a domestic political reality that may be criticized but cannot be allowed to prevent necessary cooperation.

This variation supports the argument that Islamic governance does not independently determine international responses. Its significance is relational. The Taliban communicates religiously grounded claims through institutions and policies, while external actors interpret those signals through their own normative commitments and practical interests. Islamic governance consequently shapes how engagement is understood, justified, and politically framed rather than producing a uniform outcome. The framework is therefore most useful where external actors explicitly connect their engagement decisions to Taliban governance claims or practices; it is less able to explain interactions driven almost entirely by geographical necessity, material coercion, or immediate security pressures.

4.2 Recognition Practices and Functional Engagement

The Afghan case also demonstrates the limitations of treating recognition as a binary distinction between formal acceptance and complete isolation. Since 2021, most governments have withheld formal diplomatic recognition from the Taliban while continuing to communicate with its representatives, coordinate humanitarian activities, discuss security issues, and participate in diplomatic processes involving the *de facto* authorities.

The concept of recognition without recognition describes this intermediate political condition. It does not constitute a new category in international law. Rather, it refers to the practical acknowledgment of effective governing authority without granting the political, diplomatic, and legal consequences associated with formal recognition. This interpretation is consistent with scholarship showing that recognition may be expressed through diplomatic, administrative, institutional, and symbolic practices as well as through formal declarations (Caspersen & Gueudet, 2025; Chitadze, 2024; Naskou-Perraki, 2025).

Humanitarian coordination provides the clearest example. International organizations and humanitarian agencies operating in Afghanistan must communicate with Taliban authorities regarding access, staffing, transportation, programme implementation, and the security of personnel. Such interaction acknowledges the Taliban's administrative control, but it is generally framed as necessary assistance to the Afghan population rather than political endorsement of the Islamic Emirate.

Financial and development-related engagement follows a similarly cautious structure. International support is frequently channelled through United Nations agencies, humanitarian organizations, and specialized financial mechanisms rather than directly through Taliban-controlled institutions. This arrangement permits essential services and humanitarian assistance to continue while limiting the resources, status, and institutional benefits that direct state-to-state cooperation might confer on a formally recognized government.

Diplomatic interaction is managed with comparable caution. The United Nations has maintained operational communication with Taliban authorities while continuing to raise concerns regarding women's rights, education, political inclusion, humanitarian access, and compliance with international obligations (Popalzay, 2025). Qatar has facilitated sustained diplomatic communication without resolving the recognition question. India has gradually restored practical contact for humanitarian, security, and regional purposes without formally endorsing Taliban rule (Aras & Akpınar, 2026; Mohibi, 2021). Other regional governments have received Taliban representatives, maintained embassies or diplomatic missions, or developed economic contacts while preserving ambiguity regarding formal recognition.

These practices reveal an important distinction between effective authority and legitimate authority. External actors acknowledge that the Taliban controls Afghanistan and that interaction is necessary in particular policy areas. At the same time, they carefully regulate the language, protocol, venue, representation, and visibility of such interaction. The use of terms such as "*de facto* authorities," "Taliban representatives," or "technical engagement" allows communication to continue while preserving political distance.

Recognition practices therefore perform two functions simultaneously. They enable external actors to pursue humanitarian, security, economic, and diplomatic objectives, while also communicating that practical cooperation does not amount to formal acceptance of Taliban legitimacy. Engagement is consequently neither politically neutral nor equivalent to recognition. Its institutional form and diplomatic presentation communicate continuing judgments about the status of the Islamic Emirate.

4.3 Conditions of Calibrated Engagement

The interaction between governance identity, external interpretation, and recognition practices produces a pattern of calibrated engagement. This refers to international interaction that is adjusted according to its purpose, level, conditionality, political symbolism, and perceived risks. It occupies the space between complete disengagement and comprehensive normalization.

Three broad considerations shape this calibration: normative compatibility, practical necessity, and strategic interest.

First, normative concerns constrain engagement. Restrictions affecting women and girls, limited political inclusion, and disagreements over human rights and governmental legitimacy continue to prevent many external actors from moving toward formal recognition. Where normative incompatibility is given greater weight, engagement is generally limited, technical, conditional, or explicitly separated from political endorsement. The withholding of high-level diplomatic protocol, formal representation, and access to international institutions reflects these continuing concerns.

Second, humanitarian necessity encourages continued contact. Afghanistan's economic fragility, food insecurity, displacement, inadequate public services, and dependence on external assistance make complete isolation difficult to sustain. Governments and international organizations may strongly oppose Taliban policies while recognizing that disengagement would impose disproportionate costs on the Afghan population. Humanitarian interaction can therefore become extensive even while political relations remain restricted.

Third, security and strategic considerations create additional incentives for engagement. The activities of Islamic State-Khorasan Province, transnational militancy, narcotics trafficking, irregular migration, refugee movements, and border instability encourage neighboring countries and major powers to maintain communication with the Taliban. Afghanistan's location between South Asia, Central Asia, China, and Iran also gives it potential importance for regional trade, economic connectivity, natural resources, and geopolitical influence (Khan, 2026). Engagement in these areas reflects practical and strategic calculations rather than agreement with Taliban governance.

Calibration is visible in the differentiation among forms of interaction. Humanitarian coordination may be substantial while development cooperation remains restricted. Security dialogue may occur without diplomatic recognition (Nigam, 2021). Technical meetings may become regular while high-level political normalization remains absent. Economic contacts may expand selectively while access to international financial systems continues to be limited.

The relative importance of these considerations differs among external actors. Western governments generally place greater emphasis on human rights, gender equality, and inclusive governance. Regional states frequently assign greater weight to stability, counterterrorism, trade, border management, and non-interference. International organizations are primarily concerned with humanitarian access, programme continuity, and the protection of vulnerable populations. These differences explain why the same Taliban governance signals produce varying patterns of engagement.

Calibrated engagement therefore reflects the coexistence of competing objectives rather than an inconsistent international policy. External actors seek to preserve their normative positions while also addressing humanitarian, security, and strategic necessities. Where normative disagreement dominates, political distance remains substantial. Where practical needs become more urgent, functional engagement expands. The scope of engagement is thus determined not by Islamic governance alone but by the interaction between governance signals and the priorities of particular external actors.

4.4 Feedback Effects, Strategic Ambiguity, and the Limits of Normalization

International engagement with the Taliban is not static. Repeated diplomatic meetings, humanitarian negotiations, security discussions, and regional forums influence expectations and future policy choices. These interactions create feedback effects through which both the Taliban and external actors adjust their behavior.

For the Taliban, continued contact provides opportunities to demonstrate administrative capacity, communicate policy positions, and present itself as Afghanistan's established governing authority. Participation in diplomatic processes and regional meetings may be used to claim that international actors increasingly accept the Taliban as an unavoidable political interlocutor. Repeated engagement can therefore strengthen the Taliban's practical position even without formal recognition.

For external actors, recurring interaction reduces uncertainty and provides information concerning Taliban decision-making, administrative capacity, internal cohesion, security commitments, and willingness to cooperate. Informal contacts may gradually become routinized, producing a degree of functional predictability without resulting in formal normalization (Kim, 2026; Lovato, 2024).

These feedback effects are nevertheless conditional. Cooperation on humanitarian access, counterterrorism, regional security, or economic issues may encourage broader communication. Conversely, restrictive domestic policies, especially those concerning women and girls, may reinforce diplomatic caution and prevent engagement from developing into recognition. The evolution of engagement therefore does not follow a linear movement from isolation to acceptance.

The Doha process and other diplomatic forums illustrate this dynamic. Taliban participation can normalize its operational role as a negotiating partner, while the design of meetings, conditions of participation, and level of representation preserve limits on its political status. Engagement may consequently strengthen the Taliban's position as a practical interlocutor while leaving its broader legitimacy unresolved.

This arrangement is maintained through strategic ambiguity. External actors use carefully differentiated language, protocol, institutional channels, and levels of representation to permit communication without making an unequivocal commitment to recognition. Humanitarian coordination can be separated from political negotiation. Technical cooperation can continue without normal state-to-state relations. Taliban representatives can participate in selected discussions without receiving the status accorded to a formally recognized government. Strategic ambiguity is therefore not the absence of policy. It is a method for managing the tension between practical necessity and contested legitimacy. It allows external actors to expand or restrict engagement in response to changing governance practices, security conditions, humanitarian needs, and regional developments without making an irreversible political commitment.

The Taliban benefits from this continued interaction because it reduces isolation and supports its claim to be Afghanistan's effective government. However, ambiguity also imposes significant limits. Non-recognition constrains formal diplomatic representation, major

development cooperation, international investment, institutional participation, and access to international financial systems. Practical acknowledgment therefore does not automatically translate into full political legitimacy.

Collectively, the Afghan case suggests that Islamic governance shapes international engagement through interpretation rather than direct causation. The Taliban's Islamic legitimacy claims provide the identity content that external actors evaluate, but the resulting engagement depends on the interaction of normative commitments, humanitarian priorities, security concerns, and strategic interests. The outcome is calibrated and politically managed interaction: broader than isolation, narrower than normalization, and continually conditioned by unresolved disputes over legitimacy.

Limitations

This paper is conceptual and uses post-2021 Afghanistan as an illustrative case. The framework is not empirically tested and should not be interpreted as establishing causal relationships or as universally applicable to all contested governments. The analysis also relies on secondary and publicly available materials whose institutional perspectives may shape how engagement is represented. Future research could test and refine the framework through comparative case studies, interviews, or systematic analysis of diplomatic practices.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper examined how Islamic governance shapes international engagement under conditions of contested legitimacy in post-2021 Afghanistan. It argued that Islamic governance does not directly determine recognition, isolation, or cooperation. Instead, it functions as a foreign policy identity whose significance depends on how external actors interpret Taliban governance in light of their normative commitments, humanitarian priorities, security concerns, and strategic interests.

The analysis suggests that differing interpretations of Taliban governance have produced varied patterns of international engagement. While many actors continue to withhold formal recognition because of concerns over human rights, gender equality, and political inclusion, practical engagement has persisted through diplomatic communication, humanitarian coordination, security dialogue, and limited economic interaction. This demonstrates that recognition is not simply a binary choice between acceptance and rejection but can involve continued interaction without full political or legal recognition. The framework is most useful when external actors explicitly interpret and justify engagement in relation to a governing authority's legitimacy claims and institutional practices.

The paper concludes that international engagement with the Taliban is best understood as calibrated engagement, in which practical necessity coexists with unresolved legitimacy. The Afghan case illustrates how governance identity shapes the political meaning of engagement rather than directly determining international responses. More broadly, the proposed framework contributes to understanding how contested governing authorities remain functionally engaged in international relations despite continuing disputes over legitimacy.

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