

The Taliban's Assault on Music

The group recently announced that it has destroyed more than 21,000 musical instruments in the past year—part of its broader, brutal effort to crush the spirit and culture of the Afghan people.

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Members of the Taliban stand guard after setting fire to a pile of musical instruments and equipment in 2023.

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In Afghanistan, music is being silenced—not by the gentle passing of time, but by deliberate destruction. Photos recently appeared in the media showing piles of musical instruments reduced to ashes: guitars, sitars, tanburs and rubabs—the rubab, a national symbol of Afghan identity—among them. First, we wept; then we

got angry. We call upon the global community to reverse this fundamental attack on Afghan society.

Music is a source of self-expression, connection, celebration, solace, transcendence, empathy and joy. Yet the Taliban see it as a profound threat to its extremist ideology, an un-Islamic practice. Last week, Maulvi Abdul Ghafar Farooq, a spokesman for the Taliban's Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, boasted that the regime had destroyed over 21,000 musical instruments in the past year. This is part of the Taliban's broader, brutal effort to erase music, visual art, and film from Afghan life.

The consequences of this cultural genocide are dire. The soul of a nation cannot survive without its creative expression. In attacking music, the Taliban is striking at the very heart of the spirit and identity of the Afghan people.

Nowhere is this loss more deeply felt than at the [Afghanistan National Institute of Music](#). ANIM was a beacon of hope, offering music and academic education to girls and boys from all ethnic backgrounds, with a special focus on children from economically disadvantaged families. It was a space where Afghanistan's traditional sounds harmonized with Western classical music, producing a unique fusion that gave birth to the Afghan Youth Orchestra and the all-girls orchestra Zohra—defiant symbols of progress in a country long resistant to change.

[Three years ago](#), when the Taliban regained control in Afghanistan, the school community faced a gut-wrenching choice: to give up their music and educational opportunities or flee the country, leaving their families behind. The community is indebted to Qatar for the evacuation of 273 students, faculty and staff, and to Portugal, which opened its doors to the entire school, allowing it to remain together. A miracle of international cooperation enabled the largest single airlift of imperiled musicians in human history.

Today the displaced ANIM community lives in peace, studying music and academics in Portugal while the original Kabul campus serves as an armed Haqqani Taliban base camp. Practice rooms formerly filled with joyful music-making are now patrolled by sentries armed with AR-15s. Afghanistan is a silent nation. But no number of charred instruments will destroy Afghan music. It thrives inside every Afghan musician and all of those left behind.

Meanwhile, since the Taliban's takeover, the international community—including the U.S.—has continued to pour billions of dollars in unconditional aid into Afghanistan. While this aid is essential for alleviating poverty and preventing the country's further collapse, it comes at a cost. Without any conditions or restrictions, these funds are helping to legitimize a regime that denies women and girls their

educational and cultural rights and has forced the entire nation into silence. Aid must be conditioned on tangible improvements in the areas of cultural rights and women's rights. If the Taliban refuses, a portion of the aid should be redirected to organizations providing cultural and educational services to Afghans, in-country and abroad.

Afghanistan's culture is burning, but it need not turn to ash. The global community must recognize that supporting Afghans means more than filling stomachs—it means feeding the soul and keeping alive the dream of a free, vibrant Afghanistan where music, art and self-expression flourish once again.

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