



CHS-Stimson Center Policy Brief | November 2021

A Step-by-Step Roadmap for Action on Afghanistan

What the United Nations and International
Community Can and Should Do

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Introduction

With the sudden Taliban takeover in August, Afghanistan now faces severe, multi-faceted, and interlocking humanitarian, economic, and political crises. As the country stands on the precipice of a major catastrophe, there is one global actor that can help the country pull back from the brink: the United Nations. Prior to and during Afghanistan's nearly four-decades of continuous wars—and in particular when the country was all but forgotten by the international community during the Taliban's previous period of rule—the UN remained engaged. It is vital that the organization continues its life-saving support to Afghanistan today.

This Policy Brief argues that the United Nations is best-suited to rebuild trust between the Taliban and the international community—as well as among Afghans—in order to avert a humanitarian disaster and forge a step-by-step roadmap to durable stability. It explores the role the UN can play in assisting Afghanistan by increasing trust (on the road to lasting reconciliation) between the Taliban regime and the Afghan people (or at least non-Taliban political factions), perhaps leveraging a future Loya Jirga for the purpose of increasing representation in the Taliban-led government and fostering reconciliation. The Policy Brief also summarises the challenges facing Afghanistan, identify the key comparative advantages of the UN, and provide a set of key policy recommendations to all actors concerned with durable stability and prosperity for all Afghans. This Policy Brief is the first joint publication between the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies and the Stimson Center. It follows from an expert discussion, held on 26 October 2021 at both institutes (via video conference), on the Changing Role of the United Nations in Afghanistan.¹

Challenges Facing Afghanistan

Afghanistan today faces a wide array of complex and interconnected challenges. These can be broadly categorised into challenges in the areas of humanitarian action, economic development, security, and peace.

First, and most immediately, the country faces the looming prospect of a major humanitarian catastrophe. Already plagued by COVID-19, the country is facing its second drought in four years

¹ We wish to thank the substantive, editorial, and design contributions made by our CHS-Stimson colleagues Abeedah Diab, Samiha Tadjine, Sansom Milton, Yasmeen Kalla, Joris Larik, and Banou Arjomand, as well as participants from the Changing Role of the United Nations in Afghanistan expert discussion held on 26 October 2021, including Rina Amiri (Senior Fellow and Director, Afghanistan and Regional Policy Initiative, Center on International Cooperation); Lakhdar Brahimi (Former UN Special Representative to the UN Secretary-General in Afghanistan); Ghassan Elkhoul (Assistant Professor at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies); Brian Finlay (President and CEO, Stimson Center); Humayun Hamidzada (Non-Resident Fellow, Global Governance, Justice & Security Program, Stimson Center and former Deputy Minister of Finance for Policy, Government of Afghanistan); Qari Din Mohammed Hanif (Afghan Acting Minister of Economy); Anne Havn, (Norwegian Diplomat at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs); Hardin Lang (Vice President of Programs and Policy, Refugees International); Ole Lindeman (Ambassador of Norway to Kabul); Shinichi Mizuta (Minister-Counsellor, Political Affairs, Permanent Mission of Japan to the United Nations); Abdulfatah Mohammad (CHS Visiting Research Fellow); Amb. Rick Olson (Former U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, State Department); Barnett Rubin (Senior Fellow, Center on International Cooperation); Mazar Sheikh Saleh (Independent Researcher); Vikram Singh (Senior Advisor, U.S. Institute of Peace); Sana Tariq (Research Fellow at the CHS); Elizabeth Threlkeld (Senior Fellow and Director, South Asia Program, Stimson Center); Caecilia Wijgers (Ambassador of the Netherlands to Kabul); Andrew Wilder (Vice President, Asia Programs, U.S. Institute of Peace); Tadamichi Yamamoto (Former UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Afghanistan); and Abdul Salam Zaef (Afghan Diplomat), as well as the support of Jerry Zhang and Kristin Brierly (Fall Interns, Global Governance, Justice & Security Program, Stimson Center) in preparing the experts discussion summary report.

and the worst of its kind in 27 years.² An estimated 22.8 million people, or 55 percent of the population, are expected to face emergency levels of food insecurity between November 2021 and March 2022. Rural areas are not only vulnerable to drought, but urban areas, currently hit by income loss, have also contributed to the rapid deterioration in food insecurity. No population—rural or urban—had a net positive income in 2021.³

Second, the unfolding crisis in Afghanistan halted development and threatened the prospects of rapid reversals of economic and developmental gains made over the past two decades. The liquidity crisis has worsened as a result of the U.S. freezing USD \$9 billion of Afghanistan's central bank reserves. Most pressingly, this economic spiral is occurring in one of the poorest countries in the world. According to the Asian Development Bank, 47.3% of the Afghan population was living, in 2020, below the poverty line.⁴ The UN has warned that the medium-term consequences for development in Afghanistan will be dire. UNDP forecasts that, by the middle of 2022, Afghanistan's GDP will shrink in the range of 3.6-13.2%, depending on the extent of international engagement with the Taliban—which compares to expected 4% GDP growth if the past Afghan government had remained in office.⁵ Based on these projections, Afghanistan would face conditions of almost 'universal poverty,' with poverty afflicting 97-98% of the total population.

Third, Afghanistan faces a range of hard security challenges. Attacks by Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) in Afghanistan have become more deadly since the withdrawal of NATO forces, with at least 346 civilians killed by the group since late August.⁶ In the month of October, IS-K has targeted religious minorities, with dozens killed in a suicide bombing at a Shia mosque in Kunduz during Friday prayers.⁷ In 2018, IS-K had previously attacked a girls' school in Nangarhar.⁸ With much of the Taliban's support drawn from its claims to offer security and justice that were in short supply under the previous government, the continuation of these devastating and deadly attacks will undermine the highly fragile legitimacy of the Taliban authorities.

Insecurity is also deeply linked to development conditions. Afghanistan is the world's largest leading producer of opium, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime.⁹ There is a concern that Afghanistan will become a narco-state, as opium poppy production is fueled by political instability, unemployment, and lack of educational opportunities. With sharp drops in income, surging food and other commodity prices, growing unemployment, and severed remittances,

2 OCHA Afghanistan (2021). Afghanistan: ICCT Real-Time Response Overview Situation Report (22 November 2021) - Afghanistan. [online] Humanitarian Response. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3CZqTuC>

3 Ibid

4 ADB. Poverty Data: Afghanistan. Asian Development Bank. <https://www.adb.org/countries/afghanistan/poverty>

5 The Associated Press (2021). The Latest: UN: Afghanistan on brink of "universal poverty." [online] AP NEWS. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3nXMXkL>

6 Sky News Data and Forensic Unit (2021). Afghanistan: Flurry of Islamic State Khorasan Attacks Could be Sign of Group's Growing Strength. [online] Sky News. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3lgUA43>.

7 Al Jazeera and News Agencies (2021). Dozens Killed in Suicide Blast at Afghanistan Mosque. [online] Al Jazeera. Available at: <https://bit.ly/31aw7GL>

8 Human Rights Watch (2021). Afghanistan: Surge in Islamic State Attacks on Shia. [online] Human Rights Watch. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3nXMFkH>

9 Reality Check (2021). Afghanistan: How Much Opium is Produced and What's the Taliban's Record? BBC News. [online]. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58308494>

there is also concern that more vulnerable Afghans will resort to opium, with the country fast slipping into underground cash operations through the Hawala system to survive, a channel associated with criminal activities, money laundering, and terrorism financing.

Fourth and finally, Afghanistan faces the unresolved challenge of forging an inclusive political settlement and creating the conditions for durable peace and reconciliation. The Taliban has not yet formed an inclusive government, to replace the current highly exclusive ‘caretaker’ one, which includes Taliban members, predominantly Kandahari, and with token representation from other ethnic groups in minor cabinet positions. In response to UN Security Council pressure to be more ‘inclusive, representative, and unified,’ the Taliban expressed that ‘we are ready for inclusivity but not selectivity’.¹⁰ Outside Western agendas, in particular, are viewed with suspicion.

There is a moral and practical imperative for the international community to recognise that there is as much need for a political settlement in Afghanistan today, as there was before the Taliban took over Kabul. Rather than view the Afghan peace process as having ended with the fall of Kabul, we view the peace process as a multi-year, adaptive process.

Addressing these humanitarian, development, and peace and security challenges only or primarily through Afghan capacities will be insufficient to avert the slide into a humanitarian catastrophe and security quagmire. The evacuation of thousands of Afghans, some of whom are highly skilled and educated, has impacted the institutional functioning of Afghanistan’s public sector. Recognizing their limitations, the Taliban enlisted former technocrats, from the former government, to work in the Finance Ministry. According to one state bank official, the Taliban stated ‘we are not experts, you know what is better for the country, how we can survive under these challenges.’¹¹ The movement’s transition, from insurgency to rulers of Afghanistan, is one of the many challenges facing the Taliban today.

Lakhdar Brahimi reflected on his UN leadership role in overseeing the Bonn Process, saying: “One of my own biggest mistakes was not to speak to the Taliban in 2002 and 2003 ... we should have spoken to those who were willing to speak to us.”¹² The Taliban believes that they have made several reconciliatory gestures and that these have been rebuffed by the international community, including amnesty declarations and a pledge to refrain from acts of vengeance. This is exactly why a step-by-step approach is necessary; the UN must find a pragmatic, workable diplomacy between the international community and the Taliban. In addition, calls for an emergency action plan to expand the existing UN political mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)—alongside the wider UN system field presence—beyond their original mandates are gaining traction.

10 Osama Javaid. (2021). “Ready for inclusivity, not selectivity”: Taliban before talks. [online] Al Jazeera. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3E2HpLs>

11 Samya Kullab. (2021). Economy on the Brink, Taliban Rely on Former Technocrats. [online] The Diplomat. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3FXaNDI>

12 Richard Ponzio. (2021). The Least Bad Option for Afghanistan. [online] Jordan Times. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3rh1tX1>

The United Nations Support Role in Afghanistan

The UN has for decades played an important role in Afghanistan, from coordinating humanitarian response to financing reconstruction and acting as a guarantor for peace and stability. Based on its historical role and unrivalled contemporary capabilities, there are a number of key areas in which the UN can and should play a greater role in supporting Afghan actors in responding to their current multi-faceted and intertwined set of crises.

Firstly, through UNAMA, the UN has facilitated the implementation of the 2001 Bonn Agreement by Afghan actors and their international partners. In addition to this landmark document, two subsequent agreements involving the Afghan government and international community, the 2006 Afghanistan Compact and the 2008 Afghanistan National Development Strategy, followed from skillful and sustained United Nations contributions.¹³ After UNAMA's mandate expired on September 17, 2021, the UN Security Council extended the political mission in Afghanistan by another six months. The resolution sends a clear message that the UN will resume its efforts in Afghanistan, but it will also need to keep a close eye on the country's latest developments, including the behavior of the Taliban-led government.¹⁴ Whilst many NGOs have left Afghanistan, OCHA, the World Food Program, the WHO, and UNICEF have chosen to stay and maintain a ground presence. As the humanitarian crisis worsens, and the harsh winter approaches, the UN must increase the number and types of organizations with which it collaborates, as well as deploy a larger-scale mission that can help maintain peace and ensure the flow of humanitarian aid.

Secondly, the UN is capable of facilitating negotiations between Afghan groups, including by employing various UN Charter (Chapter Six – Peaceful Settlement of Disputes) diplomatic tools and bringing various countries with a history of meddling in the nation on board for the sake of regional security.¹⁵ Given its local knowledge (for example, derived from the UN's lead role in the implementation of the Bonn Process, 2001-2005), and a track record of partnering with relevant regional and non-governmental organizations, the UN can serve as an impartial and experienced chief reconciliation adviser in seeking to leverage talks toward the formation of a more broad-based government, which could be approved at a proposed traditional Loya Jirga (traditional, large consultative forum of diverse stakeholders from across Afghanistan), in 2022, with the strong encouragement of the international community.¹⁶ In the meantime, monitoring and reporting regularly by UNAMA to the UN Security Council is necessary to document the implementation of any steps toward “a new Government that is united, inclusive and representative”, as called for by the Council.¹⁷

13 Rhoda Margesson. (2009). *United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan: Background and Policy Issues*. Diane Publishing. 5.

14 VOA News. (2021). *UN Security Council Extends Afghan Mission by Six Months*. [online] Available at: <https://bit.ly/3HZ30XI>

15 Aya Batrawy. (2021). *UN and Afghanistan's Taliban, figuring out how to interact*. [online] AP NEWS. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3lhEJSV>

16 Ponzio, *The Least Bad Option for Afghanistan*.

17 UN Security Council (16 August 2021). *Security Council Press Statement on Afghanistan*. Available at: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14604.doc.htm>

Thirdly, after the fall of Kabul, Security Council members called for an immediate end to violence in Afghanistan, the restoration of security, civil and constitutional order, and urgent talks to resolve the current crisis of authority in the country and to arrive at a peaceful settlement through an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned process of national reconciliation.¹⁸ While member states continue to debate whether to recognise the Taliban's government, the UN can play a significant role in supporting the Afghan people. In fact, as an international institution operating in fragile states worldwide, the UN frequently assumes responsibilities that no single nation wants to bear. Specifically, the UN is well-positioned to facilitate reconciliation efforts and push the Taliban to consider a more inclusive governance structure, girls and women's rights, and freedom of movement. But, the Taliban's perception of the UN is coloured by the sanctions it has imposed on the group, with the UN sanctioning, for example, the acting prime minister, Mohammad Hassan Akhund, alongside other senior Taliban leaders. Moreover, the UN must take broader steps to redress trust deficits with the Afghan people rooted in its variable track record over the past few decades. One way of doing so would be to capitalise on the Taliban's welcoming of leadership from within the region, with Taliban officials having noted how they warmly remember Lakhdar Brahimi's effective engagement given that he was a leading Arab and Muslim diplomat.

Recommendations

On September 17, 2021, the Security Council requested, by late January 2022, Secretary-General António Guterres' "strategic and operational recommendations" on future UN system engagement in Afghanistan, with the Security Council expected to take new decisions on potentially updating the UN's mandate by March 2020.¹⁹ For this and the abovementioned reasons, fresh and innovative thinking are required urgently, in order to improve relations between all actors (both internally and externally) and to enable more effective humanitarian and development responses in Afghanistan. The recommendations further aim to draw attention to the need to maintain a focus on peace by leveraging, simultaneously, humanitarian and development efforts.

First, the greatest obstacle to functioning relations is the non-recognition of the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan by the international community, which requires a step-by-step and long-term vision to resolve. Although the Taliban are publicly seeking international recognition, these efforts are unlikely to bear fruit immediately. Over the next six months, the Taliban interim government should stop continually seeking recognition and focus on governing Afghanistan and averting an economic and humanitarian catastrophe. Demonstrating the

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Al Jazeera and News Agencies. (2021). UN Security Councils extends Afghan mission mandate for six months. [online] AlJazeera. Available at: <https://bit.ly/31aw7GL>

effectiveness of the government through concerted action is the best way for the movement to slowly gain widespread international legitimacy and eventual recognition.

Such an outcome would only be feasible in the context of a clear roadmap that can build steady confidence between the Taliban and the international community over the direction of their relationship. The UN is uniquely well-positioned to lead this process, offering its convening power, with support and facilitation from experienced regional mediators, such as Qatar, which offers comparative advantages in terms of cultural and linguistic proximity to Afghanistan. This process should lead to the drafting of a mutual agreement (with clear, step-by-step, milestones) setting out a framework with measurable, time-bound expectations that will trigger reciprocal actions. On the Taliban side, this could include providing safe access to vulnerable Afghan groups, ensuring that aid is not siphoned-off by the Taliban regime, guaranteeing the rights of women, and the formation of a genuinely inclusive government representing all Afghans, including women and non-Taliban political factions. On the international community side, reciprocal steps could start from the resumption of development aid, the removal of some sanctions, and, over time, the eventual recognition of the Afghan government.

Second, the United Nations should aid in negotiating conditionalities put forward by Western powers. Whilst a step-by-step roadmap for cooperation is needed (as outlined above), vital life-saving humanitarian aid should never be made conditional on the Taliban taking certain actions. Given the acute differences between the Taliban and Western powers, diverse mechanisms are needed for addressing distinct humanitarian and non-humanitarian issues alike. Both sides have made opposing demands that essentially negate one another, while the needs of millions of innocent, vulnerable Afghans continue to grow.

Besides shared humanitarian concerns, both sides also face terrorist threats of mutual concern. Through a united front against counterterrorism, for instance the UN could support the slow integration of the Taliban into the international community. Both the international community and the Taliban are seized with the threat of terrorism and the growing threat of IS-K; hence, conditionalities should not eclipse common regional security threats and humanitarian priorities.

Third, durable peace in Afghanistan can only be reached through high-level political will that is best expressed through the expansion of an empowered mandate and sufficient resources for UNAMA. Whilst there will inevitably be limits on the scope and scale of any outside mediating UN role in Afghanistan, if individual states overpower and undermine the UN by preventing it from engaging with the Taliban, glaring weaknesses in the world body will inevitably come to the surface. For the UN to be truly catalytic, it is vital that it is entrusted with a comprehensive mandate to perform its full suite of well-known and field-tested functions, including in the areas of reconciliation, humanitarian, and development coordination. To get beyond the blame game and build trust between the Taliban and other Afghan parties, the world body must be allowed to provide its good offices and other peaceful settlement of dispute tools to resuscitate an intra-

Afghan dialogue toward reconciliation and political reform. The UN can also facilitate consensus and constructive engagement between, on one hand, the Taliban-led Afghan government, and, on the other, major powers, regional governments, and donors. Giving the UN a mandate for regional coordination can also help diversify aid channels, utilising the cross-border over-land links between Afghanistan and Iran, and Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan too.

Fourth, rather than roll out humanitarian-only models of response in Afghanistan, there is a need to remain focused on the intersections of humanitarian, developmental, and peace challenges. The humanitarian-development-peace nexus offers a powerful framework for advancing more integrated approaches that break down the traditional siloes of the international aid system in responding to the Afghan crisis.²⁰ The UN and other actors have implemented Triple Nexus programming in Afghanistan in recent years, including refugee return and reintegration, asset creation, and social safety net programming.²¹ The UN can play a vital role as a convening power and knowledge broker, facilitating local-international and whole-of-society dialogue on how to adapt nexus programming concepts and approaches in the uncharted territories of Afghanistan's fast evolving and highly challenging operating environment.

Finally, meeting humanitarian and development needs at scale will require bold and innovative forms of financing to address the country's multi-dimensional crises and challenging operating environment without exacerbating aid dependency. In October, the UN Development Programme announced the creation of a People's Economy Fund that will provide access to cash to vulnerable Afghans and micro-businesses which can bridge livelihood support and macroeconomic stabilisation. While this is a welcome move, there is a need for resource mobilisation at a much greater scale. For instance, in support of more effective crisis response in support of the most vulnerable Afghans, the U.S. government should immediately unfreeze \$1 billion in Afghan assets to capitalise a Multi-Donor Nexus Trust Fund with an independent, technocratic governance structure. As bilateral aid likely recedes among most major donors, the UN could serve as a chief oversight body and conduit of international assistance through multiple emergency trust funds. In doing so, it will provide de facto international development coordination assistance, with an eye to maintaining for all Afghan citizens the delivery of basic public services in such critical areas as healthcare, education, and power generation.

²⁰ Sultan Barakat. (2021). What can the UN do for Afghanistan now? [online] AlJazeera. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/11/10/what-can-the-un-do-for-afghanistan-now>

²¹ Paul Howe. (2019). The Triple Nexus: A potential approach to supporting the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals? World Development.

Conclusion

Founded in 1945 in the wake of World War II, the United Nations is, first and foremost, a conflict management organization with tested peacemaking, humanitarian response, and development assistance toolkit. During the post-Cold War era, the UN has demonstrated the ability—even in the most difficult circumstances—to forge a common approach among major and regional powers in pursuing peace and safeguarding the most vulnerable within a war-shattered society. Precisely by providing a continual forum and field presence, the world body can create favorable conditions for peaceful dispute settlement, while also discouraging and inhibiting unilateral foreign interference that often inflames a conflict.

With some coaxing along the way by the United Nations, whose influence draws heavily from regional and Security Council support, it is conceivable that the Taliban can be persuaded to work with a new, educated generation of Afghans—before yet more depart—on a new course that steers away from violent brutality, exploitative corruption, and widespread deprivation. To navigate the severe, multi-faceted, and interlocking humanitarian, economic, and political crises Afghanistan now faces, the United Nations is well-placed to offer critical life-saving assistance and to help Afghans avert another major catastrophe. With the backing of major global and regional powers and the cooperation of both Taliban and non-Taliban factions alike, the UN can help to place Afghanistan on a new political path for a more stable country that, over time, improves the prospects for all Afghan citizens.

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Research on Afghanistan

The insights in this Policy Brief build on Professor Sultan Barakat’s long-standing research, policy, and practitioner engagement with issues of humanitarianism, conflict, and reconstruction in Afghanistan. This includes the following publications on Afghanistan.

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Richard Ponzio is the Director of the Global Governance, Justice & Security Program and a Senior Fellow at the Stimson Center. Previously, he directed the Global Governance Program at The Hague Institute for Global Justice, where (in a partnership with the Stimson Center) he served as Director for the Albright-Gambari Commission on Global Security, Justice & Governance. Ponzio brings expertise in the areas of global and national democratic institution-building, global political economy, South-Central Asia, and the role of international institutions in responding to state fragility, climate instability, global financial volatility, and population displacement. Ponzio is formerly a Senior Adviser in the U.S. Department of State's Office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, where he conceptualized and coordinated Secretary Hillary Clinton's and later John Kerry's New Silk Road initiative. Ponzio completed his doctoral research on a Clarendon Scholarship at the University of Oxford and has published widely in academic and policy journals, edited volumes, newspapers, UN policy reports, and books, including *Democratic Peacebuilding: Aiding Afghanistan and other Fragile States* and (with Arunabha Ghosh) *Human Development and Global Institutions: Evolution, Impact, and Reform*.



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