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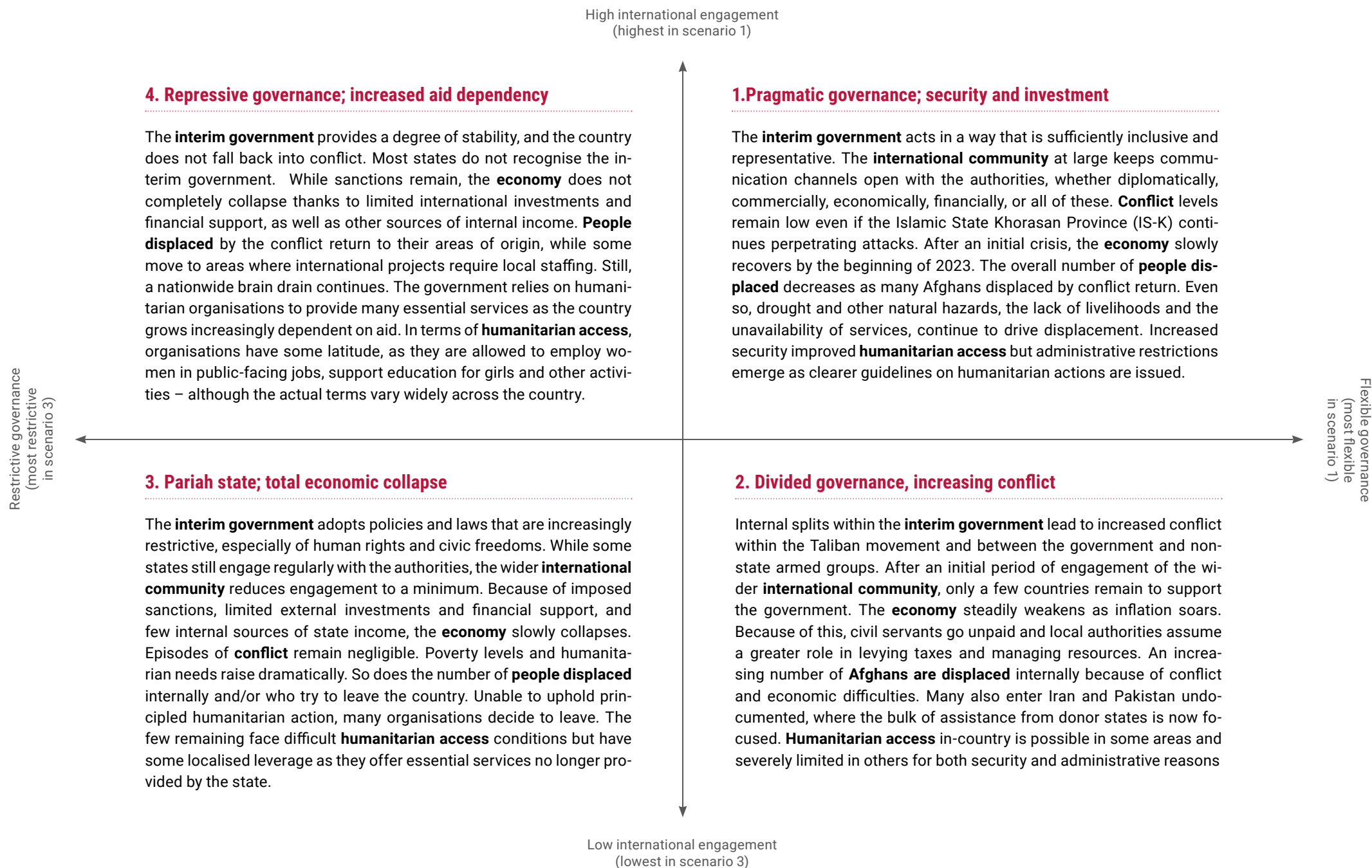
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DISPLACEMENT AND ACCES IN AFGHANISTAN: SCENARIOS

Possible developments in the profile of the displaced population and humanitarian access over the next 18 months.

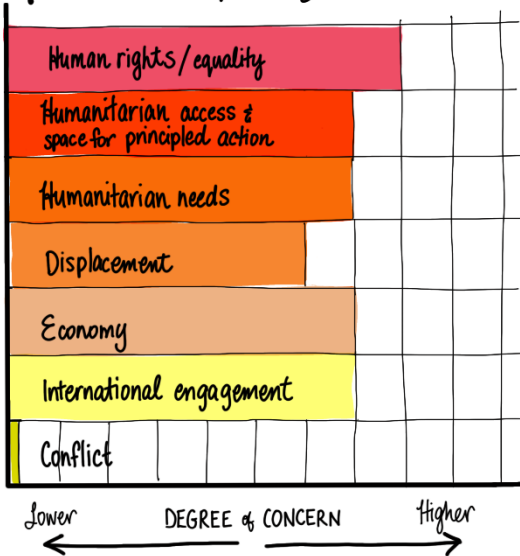


SCENARIOS AT A GLANCE

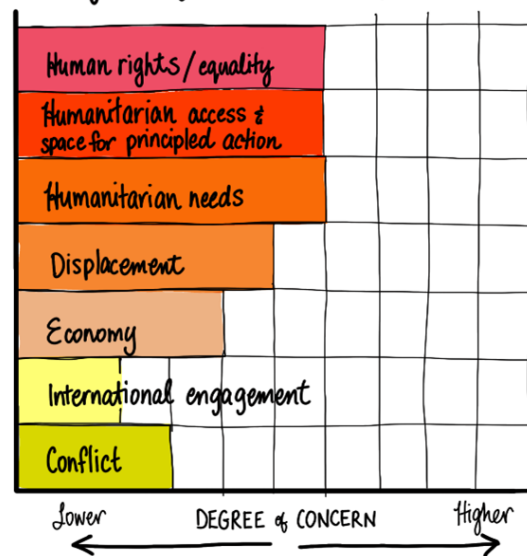


SCENARIOS AT A GLANCE

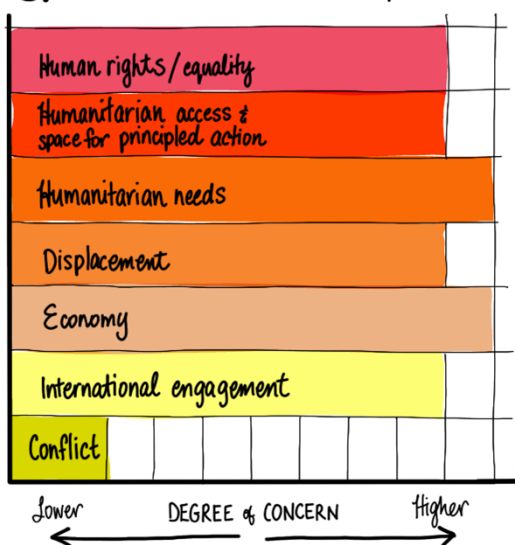
4. Repressive governance; increased aid dependency



1. Pragmatic governance; security & investment



3. Pariah state; total economic collapse



2. Divided governance, increasing conflict

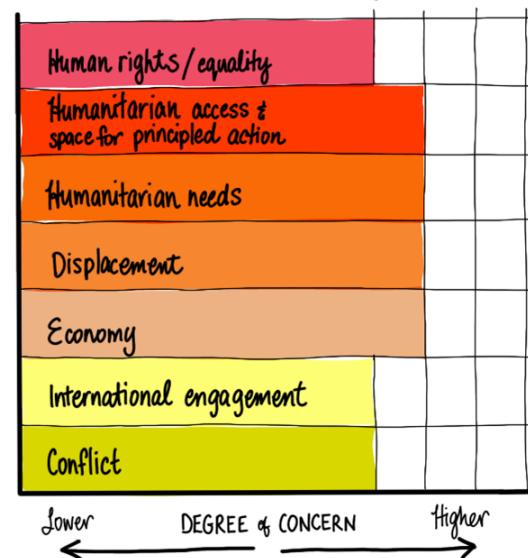


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INTRODUCTION

Problem statement

Afghanistan has been in a state of protracted conflict for over 40 years. As at 2021, 6.5 million Afghans are displaced either internally or outside the country, predominantly in Iran and Pakistan. The Afghan economy has been largely dependent on international financial support for years. Corruption at all levels has been rife (UNHCR accessed 28/09/2021; NRC accessed 28/09/2021; Transparency International 24/11/2016).

After the withdrawal of the last foreign troops from Afghanistan, the Taliban rapidly took control of all areas previously held by the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GoIRA) and declared 'the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan'. While the overall level of conflict has subsequently dropped, security for those associated with the GoIRA, the military,

activists, journalists, the LGBTQ+ community, and other persons of concern is far from guaranteed, with many reprisals being reported (Amnesty International 20/09/2021). Some representatives of the previous government, including former president Ashraf Ghani, have fled the country, while most civil servants remain (Al Jazeera 08/09/2021; ABC 31/08/2021; DW 31/08/2021). Under the new Taliban rule, many fear losing career and education opportunities primarily among the higher educated and professionals, and especially women and girls. Others fear reprisals for their ties with the previous government or the military, their profession, or their sexual orientation and gender identity. These Afghans are the most likely to attempt leaving the country in the upcoming weeks and months.

With international financial support suspended and long-standing sanctions against the Taliban affecting the whole country, Afghanistan's economy is on the brink of collapse (Reuters 20/08/2021). The interim government's intentions remain unclear. With minimal financial resources and an international community unsure of how to engage with the new administration, Afghans face an uncertain and potentially frightening future.

Considering a range of variables that affect Afghans' decision to move and the ability of humanitarian organisations to deliver assistance, the four scenarios presented in this report illustrate how displacement and humanitarian access within Afghanistan might evolve until March 2023, as well as the potential humanitarian consequences.

What scenarios are and are not

The scenarios consider four different plausible futures for Afghanistan over the next 18 months. These scenarios do not describe the imagined futures in detail but consider key differences in the governance, economic, and security environments and the extent to which, and how, people might move and access humanitarian assistance. **They are not forecasts** but instead describe situations that could occur and are designed to highlight the possible impacts and humanitarian consequences of each scenario. A most likely future might display a mix of the elements presented here as belonging to different scenarios.

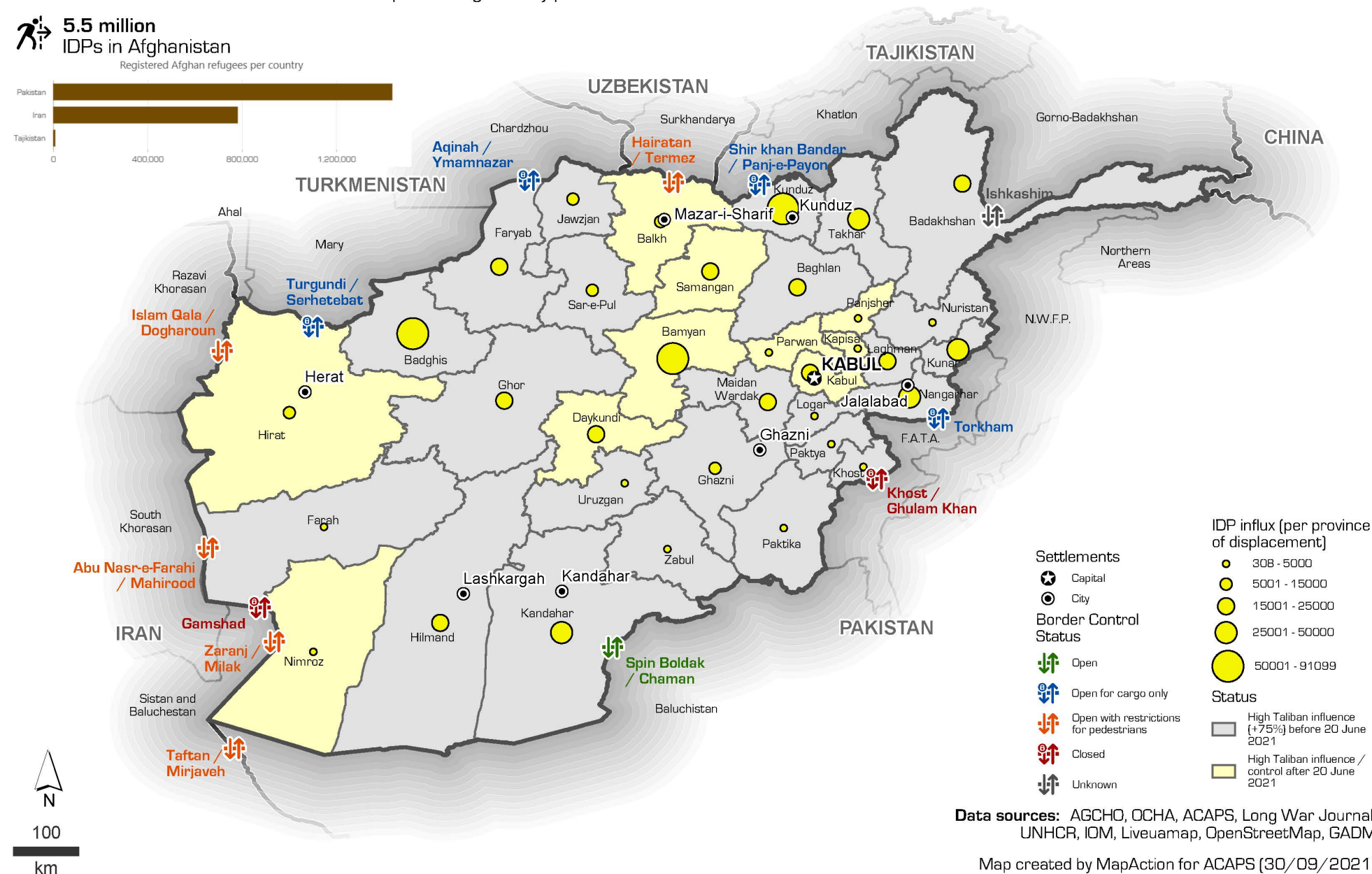
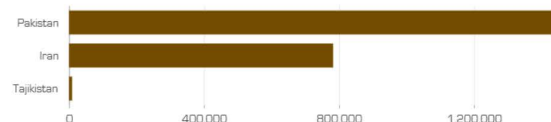
Intended purpose and audience of the report

The primary purpose of the report is to support strategic planning, create awareness, and promote discussion among humanitarian policymakers, practitioners, and donors through an understanding of the possible ways in which humanitarian needs may end up being met or not – whether intentionally or unintentionally. **The interpretation and/or use of the scenarios remains the responsibility of each agency/actor.** See the [methodology](#) section for more information on how these scenarios were developed.

Afghanistan:

Areas of influence and arrivals of conflict-displaced Afghans by province in 2021

5.5 million
IDPs in Afghanistan
Registered Afghan refugees per country



The boundaries and names and designations used on this illustrated map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by ACAPS.

Number of individuals newly displaced due to conflict between 1 January and 14 August 2021 (OCHA 12/09/2021).
Border control status (UNHCR 21/09/2021; UNHCR 27/09/2021; other updates 27/09/2021).
Province status (Long War Journal accessed 01/10/2021; Liveuamap accessed 30/09/2021).
Total IDP number (IOM 26/08/2021); registered Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries (UNHCR accessed 01/10/2021).

CURRENT SITUATION

Afghanistan

Security and conflict

Historically, several actors have been involved in the conflict in Afghanistan. Civilian casualties and violence rose to record levels in the first half of 2021. On the other hand, active fighting significantly decreased starting in July as the Taliban returned to power and took over many districts through negotiations (ACLED accessed 30/09/2021). Even after the Taliban declared victory in Panjshir Valley, however, armed anti-Taliban resistance vowed to continue operations against them (UNAMA 26/07/2021; BBC 07/09/2021; KII 08/2021).

A significant part of the leadership of Al Qaeda remains in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, in contact primarily with the Haqqani Network of the Taliban (UNSC 01/06/2021; FP 18/08/2021). Relations between the two groups continue based on ideological affinities and pre-existing relationships. Still, the Taliban have been tightening their control over Al Qaeda by collecting intelligence on, registering, and restricting foreign fighters (UNSC 01/06/2021; CFR accessed 03/08/2021).

While the presence of the IS-K remains diminished, the group is still able to launch large and complex attacks. The latest is the revendicated attack on Hamid Karzai International Airport on 26 August, where at least 183 people, both military and civilians, were killed. The group is also suspected of conducting a high-profile attack on girls attending the Sayed al-Shuhada school in Kabul on 8 May 2021. Since June 2020, IS-K has a new leader and remains a security threat, particularly if it manages to present itself as the primary opposition entity and enlists disaffected members of the Taliban and other militants (UNSC 01/06/2021; Al Jazeera 26/08/2021; OSAC 27/07/2021).

International military and diplomatic presence

International troops withdrew from Afghanistan by the 31 August deadline set by the US Government. It remains unclear whether any public or private international military forces will be allowed in by the Taliban in the future (Reuters 07/09/2021). The level of counterterrorism, over-the-horizon capabilities, and intelligence the US and other international forces will maintain is also difficult to predict, especially following a US drone strike on 27 August that sought to target IS-K members in retaliation for the attack on the Hamid Karzai International Airport. The strike killed ten civilians (Al Jazeera 09/07/2021; Atlantic Council 30/08/2021; BBC 28/08/2021; Reuters 25/08/2021; The New York Times 21/09/2021).

Coinciding with the Taliban's rapid return to power, the diplomatic and development community has largely evacuated from Kabul, while some national and international humanitarian actors remain and have opened or maintained communication channels with the de facto authorities. All international development assistance has been suspended, including International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) financial support. This is significant in a country where grants covered 75% of total public expenditures as at 2019 (WB 29/07/2019). This spending and other aid provision have already emerged as a key point of contention – and potential leverage – between the new administration, which already requested international support on key humanitarian and development issues, and part of the international community, including the EU and the US (ECFR 25/08/2021; University of Miami 30/08/2021; OCHA 13/09/2021). The level of engagement the international community will have with the Taliban remains unclear (NBC 14/08/2021; FP 24/08/2021). Pakistan is the country with historically the closest links to the Taliban and is thus among the most likely to support the interim government.

Taliban governance

Emerging governance appears to prioritise the enforcement of the group's own interpretation of Sharia, the continuity of technical governance, and local accommodations. After their takeover of Kabul, Taliban members encouraged former GoIRA employees to return to work in multiple areas across the country. On 7 September, the Taliban announced a 33-member interim government. All new ministers are men and directly or indirectly affiliated with the Taliban; most of them are from the majoritarian Pashtun ethnicity. Considering their offensive against the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF) in Panjshir Valley and their violent response to protests across the country, the interim government's composition appears to prioritise internal cohesion, the monopolisation of power, the silencing of open dissent, and, in terms of government posts, the division of the 'spoils of war' between themselves (Afghanistan Analysts Network 12/09/2021). The lack of diversity in the new cabinet and the presence of some ministers under UN sanctions and/or in US terrorism lists have triggered varying international reactions (BBC 24/08/2021; Al Jazeera 07/09/2021 and 08/09/2021; AP 08/09/2021; KII 08/2021).

Local Taliban authorities have initiated interactions with communities and NGOs, but many humanitarian operations are still paused as at September 2021, while new agreements allowing humanitarians to operate in safety have yet to be established (The New Humanitarian 10/09/2021; The Diplomat 26/08/2021). A fully formed policy on female employment, education, and NGO operations has yet to be presented. Initial statements indicated that women would be able to work and study within the limits of Islamic law as interpreted by the Taliban (France 24 17/08/2021). How this will translate into rules and limitations is not fully clear (ABC 29/09/2021). Considerable variations at the provincial level, however, are expected in the application of policies and laws based on the experience of the Taliban 'shadow government' (ODI 20/06/2018; KII 08/2021).

COVID-19

In late June 2021, Afghanistan registered the peak of the third COVID-19 wave, with as many as 2,000 new confirmed cases per day (JHU accessed 14/09/2021). Many Afghans still question the presence of the virus or believe their faith is enough to protect them. They seldom wear masks or follow social distancing and often mock those who do (WHO accessed 29/08/2021; Samuel Hall 27/07/2021).

Vaccination remains extremely limited owing to the slow arrival of vaccines. As at September 2021, only 2% of the population had received at least one dose by 20 August (Our World in Data accessed 29/09/2021). The Taliban have previously taken measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in areas under their control (MEI 13/04/2021). That said, there appears to be a lack of top-level decisions on vaccine acceptance, with reports of the Taliban banning vaccines in several provinces and some senior officials being vocal about their belief that COVID-19 is 'over' (The New Humanitarian 08/09/2021; WION 13/08/2021; Twitter accessed 17/09/2021). COVID-19 vaccination levels dropped by 80% in the week following the Taliban takeover of Kabul (Reuters 25/08/2021).

Socioeconomic environment

Political instability and the demand for foreign currency in recent weeks have led to a significant increase in exchange rates. The economy has been stagnant since 2015, with an average yearly gross domestic product growth of 2.3% between 2015 and 2019 (WB accessed 28/09/2021). The stagnation is caused by declining international support, worsening conflict and insecurity, weak confidence amid political uncertainties, and reluctance to invest. COVID-19 has also hit the economy, resulting in a 2% decrease in gross domestic product growth in 2020. In 2020 the WB warned that Afghanistan's poverty rate would rise from 50% to over 70% in 2021 (Bloomberg 17/08/2021; WB 05/04/2021 and 04/11/2020). A worst-case economic scenario projected by UNDP in September 2021 – depicting a fragmented economy and the absence of external trade – saw 97% of Afghans living below the poverty line by mid-2022 (UNDP 09/09/2021). Even before the Taliban takeover, high levels of uncertainty, a continuing lack of confidence in the economy, and climate vulnerability affecting agricultural production have been assessed as likely to continue. This will constrain private sector investment and lead to reduced spending on development needs because of fiscal pressure (WB 05/04/2021 and 04/11/2020).

Internal displacement

There are 5.5 million IDPs in Afghanistan based on data from August 2021 (IOM 26/08/2021). With the Taliban's return to power, new displacement trends and patterns arise, with thousands returning home and hundreds of thousands remaining displaced (UN 13/08/2021;

ACAPS 23/08/2021). Durable solutions remain elusive while conditions worsen for those living in protracted displacement. The Taliban have presented a new interim Minister for Refugees, Khalil Haqqani, but the level of commitment to existing government policies and initiatives regarding displaced Afghans remains unclear (KII 08/2021; Anadolu 09/09/2021).

Cross-border movements and returns

So far, no mass outflows of refugees have been reported (UNHCR 22/09/2021). Estimating the overall flow of Afghans into neighbouring countries is extremely difficult because of the undocumented nature of many of these movements. This justifies the range of estimates circulating; IOM, for instance, has assessed that around 30,000 Afghans were leaving the country weekly by the end of July (The New York Times 31/07/2021). Based on the partial data available, 4,000–5,000 Afghans were crossing over to Iran daily as at 20 August (UNHCR 20/08/2021). People continue to cross over to Pakistan through the Spin Boldak crossing point (UNHCR 21/09/2021). Key informants in Pakistan have also estimated that at least 5,500 Afghans arrived in their communities between 27 August and 20 September (UNHCR 31/08/2021 and 20/09/2021). As of 31 December 2020, before the latest influxes, almost 60% of registered Afghan refugees in Pakistan were living in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, 23% in Balochistan and 12% in Punjab (OCHA 16/06/2021). Data from Afghans' asylum applications submitted between 1 April and 26 September 2021 shows however a partly different picture in terms of current residence. Out of 10,300 individuals, almost half (45%) were living in the Federal Capital Territory, 21% in Balochistan and 19% in Punjab (UNHCR 28/09/2021). The UNHCR-issued Regional Refugee Preparedness and Response Plan anticipates a worst-case scenario of over 500,000 newly displaced refugees fleeing across the borders. New arrivals would join over 2.2 million registered refugees and three million Afghans of varying statuses in Iran and Pakistan (UNHCR 27/08/2021). Both countries seem to oppose the hosting of more Afghans and are wary of potential pull factors for migration.

As at 9 September, over 860,000 undocumented Afghans returned or were deported from Iran and Pakistan in 2021. 99% returned from Iran. The figure includes both Afghans who returned spontaneously (90% of total returns from Pakistan and 40% from Iran) and those who were deported (10% of total returnees from Pakistan and 60% from Iran) (IOM 20/09/2021). Returnees, many of whom have sold assets such as housing, land, and property to migrate, are often unable to resettle in their place of origin because of insecurity and the lack of livelihood opportunities. People arriving in Afghanistan through forcible deportation often arrive in poor health and without the financial capacity or connections to re-establish their lives. Many returnees report challenges in finding decent work, violence, and debt and they plan to migrate out of Afghanistan again. Only a few report receiving assistance upon arrival (IOM 26/08/2021; EASO 25/06/2021).

Climate vulnerability

GolRA declared a drought in June 2021. Over three million Afghans are likely to be acutely affected by the phenomenon this year, especially in areas in the north, south, and west of the country (NRC 09/06/2021; ACTED 10/09/2021). Precipitation is likely to be below average through the end of the year (FSAC 24/02/2021; WMO accessed 14/09/2021; NRC 09/06/2021). Because of the previous drought in 2018, 370,000 displacements were registered in Afghanistan, with some still living in displacement three years later (IDMC 05/2019; NRC 09/06/2021). In northern provinces, people have indicated that moving away would be one of their coping strategies should they remain without any livelihood (NRC 09/06/2021).

Humanitarian access

Afghanistan remains one of the most challenging operational environments and most dangerous countries for humanitarians. Many humanitarian operations are still suspended across the country, pending the stabilisation of the security situation and current negotiations with the interim government. These negotiations include issues affecting female staff and recipients, as well as independent humanitarian action (The New Humanitarian 17/09/2021; OCHA 19/08/2021; UN 16/08/2021).

While humanitarian staff can enter the country through UNHAS, three critical uncertainties remain and affect access. One is the extent of the allowed employment of female humanitarians, especially nationals, despite initial assurances from Taliban authorities. Second is the deployment, acceptance, and safety of humanitarian actors, including nationals, throughout the country and especially in the south. Third uncertainty is the extent of bureaucratic impediments may change, as many government departments have not fully reopened, and a significant gap in qualified staff is expected. These access barriers largely depend not only on the stance of de facto authorities but also on the acceptance of some communities and given certain cultural practices.

Taliban authorities have called for the resumption of humanitarian activities and reportedly produced a manual on NGO operational guidelines. How these theoretical guidelines and assurances will translate on the ground and be implemented by local and decentralised authorities remains to be seen. Visas, work permits, registration, countrywide security guarantees for humanitarian operations, NGO frameworks, standard operating procedures, and memoranda of understanding are key functions for NGOs to continue working and remain unclear under the new administration (The Diplomat 26/08/2021; KII 08/2021).

Sanctions and financial access

Over USD 9 billion of the Afghan central bank's foreign reserves remain frozen, and IMF and WB financial aid is still suspended (Tolo News 20/09/2021; The Conversation 21/09/2021). The interim government introduced a USD 200 weekly withdrawal limit on 28 August; the limit has since been increased for merchants and company owners (New York Post 01/09/2021; Xinhua 21/09/2021). Public servants, some of whom had not been paid for months before the Taliban takeover, are still waiting for their salary as the interim government faces reported 'technical problems' that remain unsolved at the time of writing (Al Arabiya 17/09/2021).

While banks have reopened across the country, Afghans and humanitarian NGOs still face limited services and restrictions on withdrawals, as well as the limited operation of the hawala¹ system forcing the organisations to explore alternative operational arrangements (Reuters 03/09/2021; KII 08/2021).

The lack of access to money (coming into and accessible in-country) is currently the most pressing operational challenge to sustain humanitarian operations, including salary payments and local purchases. Banks continue to be closed for commercial services, including to NGOs, which cannot access their funds in Afghan bank accounts. Even when the hawala system is fully restored, this will not be a long-term solution because of the scale of money transfers required and the difficulty for the system to meet potential additional accountability and transparency requirements imposed by some international donors (KII 09/2021).

Humanitarian actors require clear safeguards from counterterrorism regulations and legislation to make basic transactions like the processing and transferring of funds; the payment of taxes, tolls, other fees and import duties; and the purchase or reception of permits, licenses, and public utility services and telecommunications.

Iran

Background

Iran already hosts around four million Afghans, including 780,000 with refugee status, 586,000 holding passports, and 2.6 million undocumented (UNHCR 30/06/2021). The 'invisible' Afghan population remains fluid, with hundreds of thousands arriving in Iran each year and hundreds of thousands leaving or deported. So far in 2021, more than 860,000 undocumented Afghans have returned to Afghanistan, 60% of whom were deported (UNHCR 20/08/2021; IOM 20/09/2021).

¹ In Arabic, 'hawala' means 'transfer'. The definition and scope of hawala adopted in this report is as identified by Maimbo, which refers generally to money transfer mechanisms that exist in the absence of, or parallel to, conventional banking channels (Maimbo 08/2003).

New arrivals and cross-border movements

Nearly 3,000 Afghans arrived through the Zaranj crossing point in early August, including Afghan forces who were later returned to Afghanistan, as well as single men and families. By 25 September, only 218 remain in Iran (BAFIA/Gol in UNHCR 26/09/2021). So far, only a small number of Afghans (mostly those holding valid Iranian visas) have entered Iran through official border crossings. Unofficial entries increased from 1,500–2,400 to 5,000 per day in late August (UNHCR 20/08/2021). Afghan refugees continue to enter via Sistan and Balochistan Province via smuggling routes. Aid agencies and government authorities are unlikely to access this population as they will try to remain invisible (UNHCR 19/08/2021; KII 08/2021).

The Iranian Government has not shared a public plan on whether and how it will host new arrivals from Afghanistan. This has made it difficult for aid agencies to plan and access populations of concern. Despite looking to scale up operations, aid organisations find it difficult because of limited access and information (KII 08/2021).

Humanitarian needs

Newly arriving refugees need protection and access to humanitarian assistance, including shelter and food (UNHCR 19/08/2021).

Iran has an inclusive policy towards the current Afghan refugee caseload and endures most of the cost with minimal contributions from the international community (ILNA). Afghan refugees have needs across all sectors: protection and access to documentation, access to livelihoods and food security, education, health, shelter, and WASH. Registered refugees and visa holders can work in certain job categories (UNHCR 09/08/2021; UNHCR 25/05/2020; ECHO 30/04/2020; UNHCR 08/06/2021). All the people in Iran have access to primary healthcare, but some, including undocumented refugees, might not approach health facilities in fear of deportation. Undocumented Afghan children can enrol in basic education in Iranian public schools (Tasnim News).

Humanitarian operations

Most agencies operating in Iran support only documented refugees, to lesser extent “passport holders”, and aid limited numbers of undocumented refugees. As a result of the bureaucratic system, humanitarian organisations have very limited access in the country, as they are required to obtain approvals for missions, activity implementation, the vetting of staff, the lists of schools to rehabilitate, etc. Operational space is limited for international actors as the Iranian Government supports local NGOs as frontline responders, while international aid agencies provide technical assistance, capacity-building, and financial support (KII 08/2021).

Socioeconomic environment

The Iranian economy has been severely hit by the withdrawal of the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May 2018 and, more recently, by COVID-19. The economy had already shrunk by 12% in the two years preceding the pandemic (WB accessed 28/09/2021). This economic crisis has had its toll on the most vulnerable in the country, many of whom are likely Afghans. Afghans affected by the economic situation also struggle to renew their documentation and resort to negative coping mechanisms (WB accessed 28/09/2021; UNHCR 30/06/2021, NRC 12/2020).

COVID-19

Iran is among the Middle Eastern countries that has been most affected by the pandemic. So far, around 5.5 million cases and nearly 120,000 deaths have been registered. August saw a spike in the outbreak, with confirmed cases nearly doubling, and deaths tripling compared to two months prior (WHO accessed 29/09/2021). Afghans, in principle, are covered by the public health programme for COVID-19; vaccination for Afghans aged 75 and with refugee status started in June (AA 19/08/2021; Tehran Times 07/09/2021).

Conflict and security

There are some security issues at the border with Pakistan, in Sistan and Balochistan province, mainly related to the smuggling of drugs and people (mostly Afghans trying to enter Iran through Pakistan) (AREU 21/09/2021).

SCENARIOS

1. Pragmatic governance; security and investment



While remaining true to their Islamic ideals, the new administration governs in a sufficiently representative and inclusive way to gain increasing acceptance and engagement from the international community throughout 2022, as well as a few diplomatic recognitions. The new authorities maintain law and order and are seen to root out corruption while keeping a lean and frugal state apparatus, which is received well by the majority of the population. The end of clashes in Panjshir Valley leaves military operations against IS-K as the only active conflict. The interim government also stems the nationwide brain drain and keeps those in highly qualified positions through a combination of incentives and restrictions on leaving the country. The central government maintains the responsibility for determining how Sharia is interpreted² how laws and policies are established and implemented, and how public services are funded. A tight control on corruption and security provision standards remains a prerogative of theirs.

Still, significant differences in service provision and personal freedom are seen between regions based on the flexibility and the capacities of provincial authorities and local communities. Keen to support a peaceful Afghanistan and save face, the international community engages positively with the new administration even when its policies fall short of international demands. Key states re-establish unofficial representations in the country and keep communication channels open. Some high-income regional countries, such as Qatar, provide financial support to the interim government to help with running costs and offer technical support. After an initial financial crisis caused by the uncertain prospects of the country, the central bank is recognised again as legitimate, and some sources of funding resume, enabling the provision of basic services. The economy slowly opens up, supported by renewed trade with neighbouring countries and a fully functioning hawala system.

² Laws are established and implemented based on specific interpretations of Sharia (in the Taliban's case – Hanafi).

³ "Any assistance spent by a donor partner and implementing agency outside of the government's national budget; because the funds bypass the core national budget, the government has no control over these funds" (Wardak 02/2016).

A slow economic recovery is underway by early 2023, facilitated by increased tax revenue in certain areas, the resilience of the Afghan informal economy and the increase of incoming remittances from the diaspora. Many Afghans previously displaced by conflict return to their homes, although significant numbers of the better educated from areas under more restrictive governance seek to move to Kabul or out of the country.

Possible triggers

- The interim government takes steps to transition to a more representative government by including significant non-Taliban representation.
- Internal disputes among the Taliban, especially around issues of inclusive governance, do not escalate, as they maintain unity while seeking international recognition and eye the longer-term state-building of the Emirate.
- The new administration has more open and outward-looking foreign policies compared to the 1990s.
- The population welcomes improved levels of security provision (or the perception thereof).
- The new administration crafts a positive narrative of security and basic service provision in urban and rural areas, persuading Afghans to stay in the country.
- The new administration shows more flexibility and change in policymaking compared to the 1990s in matters of human rights, including the rights of women and minorities.
- Afghans with technical skills retain their previous jobs in the administration or gain new government employment.
- Pressing issues such as counterterrorism and the provision of humanitarian assistance keep the international community, including Western and regional states, engaged with the new administration even when its policies fall short of international demands.
- Some sanctions are eased.
- Some countries, such as Pakistan, officially recognise the interim government.
- Some countries (such as Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey) continue or even scale up investments and give financial and technical support to the interim government.
- Off-budget³ aid funding continues through humanitarian funding streams.



- Development funds channelled to development actors such as UN agencies are scaled up, with a focus on infrastructure and other projects. In the short term off-budget trust funds are used to avoid direct money transfer to Taliban authorities.
- Western states use humanitarian and development funds as a pressure point to influence the new administration.
- The US unfreezes the Afghan central bank's assets.
- WB and IMF restart aid to Afghanistan.
- Taliban fighters are gainfully re-employed.

Geographic areas of most concern

Some areas in the south are likely to be more restrictive and challenging to operate in line with humanitarian principles.

Considering the lingering IS-K presence, international military counterterrorism strikes and small-scale attacks are more likely to be registered in the east, while high-scale attacks are more likely to affect populations in Kabul and provincial centres.

Impact

As visas and documents are issued again, a minority of Afghans manages to leave the country. On the other hand, following the cessation of widespread conflict and the perception of increased stability and easier access to livelihoods and economic opportunities, many Afghans originally displaced within the country by conflict decide to return to their places of origin.

Neighbouring countries hosting Afghans and engaging diplomatically with the new administration, such as Iran and Pakistan, push for returns pointing to the established narrative of stability, amnesties, and security provision. The number of Afghans forcibly returned is on the rise. While the overall number of IDPs decreases as conflict subsides, other Afghans continue to move or remain displaced because of the continuing drought and other localised natural hazards, unemployment, economic difficulties, and localised collapses of the health system. Rural households are especially affected. The number of displaced Afghans includes forcibly returned and secondarily displaced undocumented Afghans who need humanitarian assistance.

In this context, after losing their livelihoods, former farming households move to urban centres looking for labour. Some localised displacement is also registered from areas where

health services collapse owing to intensifying outbreaks of COVID-19 and other diseases. Displacement flows are towards areas with the best service provision, such as urban centres, or where more humanitarian assistance is offered. With more stability, China resumes mining plans in the country, expands existing trade channels, and starts infrastructure-building projects within the Belt and Road Initiative, creating only limited low-skilled job opportunities for local communities. Some Organisation of Islamic Cooperation countries such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan continue or expand their investments and infrastructure-building projects, including schools.

Humanitarian consequences

Increased activity by new donors, including China, is registered, while long-standing country donors continue providing humanitarian aid. Despite this, the amount of humanitarian funds channelled does not reach pre-August 2021 levels. Humanitarian aid is a tool to acquire standing and political clout for the new administration, which uses it to provide services.

Access to services such as education and health facilities is not homogenous throughout the country. Girls' and women's access to these services is formally allowed but remains highly dependent on the stance of provincial and local authorities and local practices and is subject to conditions. Protection concerns remain in areas of increased restrictions that affect different population groups. To successfully resettle, returnees require humanitarian assistance and development support, including the purchase or recovery of housing, land, and property (HLP) and the re-establishment of livelihoods. Their priority needs are HLP, shelter, livelihoods and WASH are their priority needs. Some are secondarily displaced as return and settlement in the area of origin proves impossible.

Operational constraints

As conflict levels subside and the same authority largely controls the country, humanitarians left in-country resume programmes and more easily access certain provinces. In the initial absence of specific government policies regulating humanitarian action, ad hoc permissions for projects are granted, and taxes are levied for their execution, with few exceptions. Female staff can formally



work everywhere, but in practice are allowed to operate only in specific projects and localities, as Taliban authorities implement different levels of restrictions. Without an established and unique coordination channel between the humanitarian community and the new administration, NGOs with fewer or lower-level contacts with the government experience more difficulties in implementing projects. Once humanitarian programming resumes and the administration establishes standard policies on humanitarian operations, bureaucratic hurdles and interferences in programming increase. Similarly, restrictions on 'soft activities' such as educational projects using NGOs' own curricula, and on protection interventions are enforced.

SCENARIOS

2. Divided governance; increasing conflict



Despite much negotiation, no clear and effective governance structure is established. Attempts by the Taliban leadership to create an inclusive government in Kabul, coupled with amnesty for former enemies and a willingness to allow greater freedoms, cause internal divisions, with more conservative elements breaking away. Some join the IS-K, striking both Taliban and Hazara targets, while others remain separate. The NRF also attempts to regain control. Conflict restarts in many areas, with the different factions receiving support from outside the country.

Many laws remain vague and open to local interpretation, especially on the participation of women and girls in daily life and education. Other less sensitive topics such as HLP rights are subject to clearer legislation. Guidelines for humanitarian operations are promised but not delivered. This lack of clear governance delays international engagement, with only a few countries providing even limited investment in the country.

While incidents of localised conflict are frequent and widespread, the country mainly remains under the control of the Taliban. Despite continued support from Pakistan and a strong hawala system ensuring continued imports and remittances, the afghani continues to fall and prices rise. The central bank remains isolated from the international system and fuels rapid inflation by printing money to compensate for the lack of income. With only minimal financial support from sympathetic countries, which only invest strategically to benefit their own interests, public sector expenditures are no longer sustainable, and many state employees go unpaid. The drug trade increases. Provincial and local authorities become the most significant decision-makers, and corruption and local taxation increase, as they seek to raise revenues locally.

Humanitarian activities are permitted, but donors tighten their oversight to ensure that counterterrorism measures are observed while local authorities impose varied and ever-changing bureaucratic hurdles. Operations are possible in some areas and severely limited, for security and administrative reasons, in others.



Possible triggers

- Th interim government takes steps to transition to a more representative government by including significant non-Taliban representation.
- Public protests increase against the interim government.
- Access to basic services significantly deteriorates.
- Livelihood opportunities are further reduced because of droughts, attempts to reduce poppy cultivation, and other reasons.
- The factionalisation of the Taliban across the country creates local power vacuums.
- There is conflict between the Taliban and other groups.
- The Pakistan Taliban expand into eastern Afghanistan.
- External support to and the capability of IS-K, NRF, and/or other groups increase.
- Pakistan-India relations deteriorate.
- Remote operations by foreign military forces resume inside Afghanistan.
- Neighbouring countries maintain borders open only to Afghans already possessing official documentation.
- No large-scale third-country resettlement scheme is implemented.
- No significant bilateral funding is provided to the Afghan central bank.
- The lack of functioning formal banking institutions hinders the economic engagement of most countries.
- IMF and WB do not restart development funding.

Geographic areas of most concern

- Rural areas where access to services is more heavily compromised by conflict are particularly affected.
- With the NRF attempting to take back control, clashes increase in Panjshir and affect nearby provinces with the resulting displacement.
- Eastern Afghanistan also sees increased humanitarian needs and displacement if conflict involving the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan starts.
- Areas of the south are likely to see more restricted humanitarian operations and acute needs.
- In border areas thousands try to cross undetected but are blocked, returned and/or exposed to protection risks.

Impact

Initial efforts by foreign governments to either invest in Afghanistan or support the government in re-establishing a stable country which enables the recovery and delivery of humanitarian assistance wane as the interim government's lack of cohesion becomes apparent and security deteriorates. This reduction of support, coupled with the need to prioritise the payment of soldiers and the procurement of munitions, results in a rapid decline in public services as salaries go unpaid and those that can leave the country.

In areas of active conflict and those deemed less safe, displacement increases, primarily to larger urban areas where services, opportunities, and humanitarian aid are more readily available than in rural areas. The provision of basic services decreases.

Even in large urban areas that see less conflict, the provision of public services decreases, and food prices rise. Few women and children have access to educational and cultural activities. Many Afghans seek to leave for Iran and Pakistan, and international pressure to open borders and facilitate the establishment of camps increases. While borders remain officially closed to Afghans, in reality, more and more people are smuggled or autonomously enter undocumented into both countries.

Humanitarian consequences

The upsurge in conflict hinders humanitarian operations and the humanitarian space in Afghanistan shrinks. Humanitarian assistance becomes heavily politicised internally and externally, with aid delivery subject to multiple conditions. While UNAMA's mandate is renewed and its in-country activities continue, the UN and the humanitarian community struggle to maintain consensus on principled engagement. This is especially true in light of the varying participation of women and girls in public life and education.

More restrictive counterterrorism guidelines are put in place by donors as conflict escalates, disrupting humanitarian reliance on the regional hawala system to transfer cash and pay salaries. As the public sector crumbles, humanitarians struggle to coordinate with the authorities.

Localised fighting, which fuels concerns about protecting civilians and civilian infrastructure, including schools, triggers internal displacement events. There is a steady and widespread movement of individuals and households, resulting in rising humanitarian needs that include shelter and WASH. IDPs also become less visible, harder to reach with the overall humanitarian response, and less likely to be funded. Aid concentrates in accessible areas, driving further displacement. Access to food, education, and healthcare becomes increasingly difficult for some rural Afghans as livelihoods remain minimal because of the faltering economy and

the conflict. People take on high levels of debt and sell housing, land, and other properties to afford food and healthcare costs.

Large-scale displacement to neighbouring countries, with people increasingly relying on smugglers, exposes many to additional risks and adds to the number of undocumented Afghans in Iran and Pakistan. Unable to conduct operations in Afghanistan, several aid agencies scale up operations in the two countries. In doing so, they benefit from international funds channelled into the refugee response there and aimed at preventing onwards displacement to Europe and Turkey. The pressure to have an extended third-country resettlement plan grows, but its reach is insignificant. In countries where camps are established for new arrivals and some services are provided, undocumented Afghans, instead of being immediately returned, remain under the tight control of authorities, and have no formal status or guarantees for long-term settlement and/or employment. Countries largely suspend forced returns pending the stabilisation of the situation in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, returns of undocumented arrivals to Iran and Pakistan settling outside the allocated camps continue to occur, unless they are clearly being identified as escaping persecution (i.e., Hazara minority).

Operational constraints

Overall humanitarian capacities decrease as a result of reduced funding, tighter international restrictions, volatile security conditions, and the continued haemorrhaging of skilled and trained humanitarian staff out of the country. In some locations, primarily in the east, operations are constrained by the conflict, including drone strikes. With several groups taking up arms, targeted attacks on humanitarian missions resume, making the humanitarian community more averse to risk.

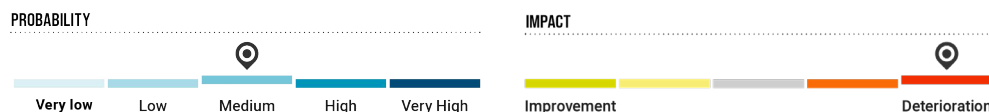
Donors implement more challenging counterterrorism measures, while multiple banking issues emerge and remain unaddressed. One of them is bank derisking which further complicates humanitarian cash flows. Most humanitarian goods must be procured outside Afghanistan and then imported, increasing costs and implementation times.

Most international humanitarian staff remain outside the country. Neighbouring countries keep a close eye on the scaled-up humanitarian response within their borders and guarantee only limited access to camps and other facilities.



SCENARIOS

3. Pariah state; total economic collapse



The interim government becomes relatively robust, without empowering any of the previous administration. Despite their initial rhetoric, the new administration rigidly sticks to Taliban ideology⁴ when interpreting Sharia and enforcing laws and policies, severely restricting personal freedom, especially for women. At the same time, economic gains from mineral extraction keep fuelling local corruption and criminality as state control of the sites, let alone taxation, does not materialise. The rule of law suffers as a consequence. These factors provoke significant backlash from much of the population while triggering the exodus of the better-educated and highly skilled, leaving government ministries and humanitarian organisations short of qualified and experienced staff and often driving capital flight. Demonstrations in major cities are violently suppressed. Many Western states condemn the regime. Reports of Taliban reprisals and human rights abuses result in an increase in sanctions. Only a few countries, including Pakistan, China, Iran, and Russia recognise and actively engage with the interim government, providing very limited financial support – primarily through investments in mineral extraction and infrastructure. While not officially endorsed, the illicit trade of drugs, gems, timber, and gold continues. The interim government supplements its limited income by levying taxes, imposing customs duties, and selling some of the foreign equipment left behind by foreign and former Afghan troops to neighbouring Iran. The central bank is not recognised and can no longer finance trade credit, leaving humanitarian organisations reliant on short-term solutions such as the hawala system. Traders and business owners relying on the formal banking system are deprived of investment opportunities. Ostracised by the international community and receiving insufficient concrete support from the few sympathetic states, the Afghan economy collapses. Public services fail, inflation soars, and unemployment rises sharply. The oppressive policies, lack of opportunities, rising inflation, and failing services drive mass displacement, mostly towards Pakistan and Iran. Onwards migration to Europe is encouraged by neighbouring states.

Possible triggers

- Pakistan recognises the interim government and shores it with funds to secure its leverage.
- China engages with the interim government, partially resuming the exploration and usage of mines.
- Additional international sanctions are imposed on the Taliban government.
- No significant bilateral funding is provided to the Afghan central bank
- IMF and WB do not restart development funding.
- Women are excluded from the public sphere, except for very limited involvement in education and healthcare service provision in gender-segregated, public-facing settings and only when deemed necessary.
- Retaliation and reprisals against former opponents, activists, journalists, media personalities, and minorities are documented.
- The lack of functioning formal banking institutions hinders the economic engagement of most countries.
- Taliban authorities impose very restrictive conditions on humanitarian actors.

Geographic areas of most concern

The whole country is affected.

Impact

The interim government is unable to provide even a basic level of public services. Power cuts become frequent; schools for girls close, and many schools for boys lack resources and staff; hospitals do not have the necessary equipment and supplies. Lacking salaries and supplies public sector employees are no longer able to work. Inflation soars, driving price rises. Imports reduce dramatically, resulting in food and fuel shortages.

Cross-border movement sharply increases, mainly through smuggling channels, since countries like Iran keep their official borders closed and do not allow the scale-up of humanitarian response. The availability of aid, limited services and employment determines the new direction of internal displacement. Unemployed Afghans from rural areas, especially young

⁴ For further details on the meaning of 'Taliban ideology', please see Gopal and van Linschoten 5/2017.



men and heads of households, leave their families behind to safeguard land and properties and move to the biggest cities, such as Herat, Kabul, Kandahar, and Mazar-i-Sharif, to look for livelihoods, job opportunities, and humanitarian aid. Failing to find any of those, tens of thousands enter neighbouring countries looking for livelihoods. A number attempts to migrate even further, towards Europe. Families left behind in places of origin become highly dependent on remittances. A high volume of wealthier Afghans also leave the country.

After a targeted increase of restrictions, Hazaras and other minorities emigrate following the same routes. Ineffective government response to natural hazards triggers other internal displacements, away from affected areas.

Humanitarian consequences

The collapsing economy leads the population to near-universal poverty with skyrocketing levels of needs in multiple sectors. Deprived of most sources of livelihoods, people cannot afford food, healthcare, rent, or education. Unable to pay for their regular expenses, households – especially those displaced – gradually sell their assets, including HLP and livestock, at very low prices. As Afghans cannot afford safe shelters and adequate WASH services, needs in these sectors spike, while protection issues also become rampant.

Funds from the few supporting countries, such as Pakistan, finance primarily security and military assets and the families of combatants who died in clashes rather than key humanitarian projects. While needs are severe and widespread, many humanitarian organisations are unwilling or unable to work within the terms dictated by the authorities. Working with the scarce funds available, the interim government prioritises the provision of a legal system and some education and healthcare. In the healthcare sector, operations from the remaining NGOs are welcomed as people needs worsen. This gives responding organisations some localised leverage. Nonetheless, the lack of access for journalists, academics, and humanitarians makes needs assessment and information management increasingly challenging as data cannot be collected, and it becomes hard to predict where needs and crises will arise.

Operational constraints

Humanitarian access is on Taliban terms and unacceptable for most INGOs that leave the country. With less funding and increased international restrictions, overall humanitarian capacities decrease. The lack of security guarantees further fuels humanitarian disengagement. Most of the few remaining humanitarian actors allowed to operate in limited areas of the country are those who had already dealt with Taliban authorities before August 2021. Some still need to follow lengthy processes of access renegotiation before being fully operational

again, leaving people in need without assistance for an extended period. Humanitarian organisations are subject to varying levels of Taliban scrutiny, also depending on the country where they are headquartered. Some organisations are asked to show project proposals and lists of people targeted by aid programmes. Principled aid delivery is increasingly difficult, with some organisations not adhering to the standards. International staff and some NGOs are refused visas and/or entry to specific provinces. Reaching Afghan women and girls becomes even more difficult, as female humanitarians, except for members of the health sector, are no longer allowed to work.



SCENARIOS

4. Repressive governance; increased aid dependency



The interim government brings a measure of stability to the country but remains unrecognised by most states. Emphasis on Taliban ideology⁵ and their own interpretation of Sharia results in highly restrictive policies, especially for women. International sanctions remain preventing any investments or bilateral support, while those part of the Afghan diaspora are vocal in their calls for additional sanctions. Despite these, some countries, such as China and Qatar, make significant investments, including in the mineral sector and in the construction of infrastructure. They also provide sufficient foreign currency to enable the partial payment of public sector workers and prevent total economic collapse. The drug trade, the sale of captured military equipment, and cross-border taxation provide additional income, but the economy struggles.

As life in Afghanistan increasingly resembles the late 1990s, most educated Afghans seek to leave the country, contributing to the brain drain. The relative security provided by the Taliban enables many internally displaced by conflict to return home. While some move to areas of new foreign investment where a few employment opportunities arise, others return to agriculture and struggle to survive.

With the interim government only providing a basic level of public services and most development funding suspended, many in the population are highly dependent on humanitarian aid. Aware of this, the Taliban permit humanitarian organisations some latitude, allowing them to employ women in public-facing jobs, support education for girls and other activities – although the actual terms vary widely across the country. Humanitarian organisations cease operations in some areas, where local Taliban leaders and NGOs fail to agree, precipitating mass displacement to areas where the humanitarian community can provide a comprehensive range of services.

Possible triggers

- The interim government remains in place with only cosmetic changes.
- The Taliban remain united by becoming more decentralised.
- Taliban fighters are gainfully re-employed.
- There is no significant conflict within Afghanistan.
- IMF and WB do not restart development funding.
- Sanctions remain.
- Mechanisms to enable humanitarian funds to enter the country are put in place.

Geographic areas of most concern

Areas controlled by the most conservative Taliban (in the south and the east) are affected the most.

Impact

The implementation of increasingly strict laws in some provinces drives displacement to other more pragmatically administered areas – especially from non-Pashtun majority areas – and causes many international and national humanitarian organisations to cease operations or compromise values. Poverty in these areas rises sharply. With Afghanistan seemingly stable, Iran and Pakistan keep their borders closed to refugees, increasing irregular cross-border displacement as the more educated, especially women, seek opportunities abroad. Returns from Iran and Pakistan (not necessarily voluntary), increase, along with economic migration to cities.

While sanctions remain, the economy does not completely collapse. Drug trade increases, being a key source of revenue for the interim government. Criminality and the use of local, ad hoc taxation become commonplace.

Cross-border trade grows, although the afghani devalues further, which increases the prices of imported goods. Food, healthcare, and clean water costs rise across the country.

While Chinese and Qatari investments benefit some areas and create a few new jobs, most other international economic engagements decrease and focus on combating the drug trade and preventing the export of terrorism.

⁵ For further details on the meaning of 'Taliban ideology', please see Gopal and van Linschoten 5/2017.

Humanitarian consequences

The overall number of Afghans in need of humanitarian assistance rises sharply, exceeding the ability of humanitarian organisations to deliver. IDPs returning to their places of origin, those returned from neighbouring countries, and the newly displaced all struggle to earn a living wage unless well connected. Their HLP, shelter, and WASH needs remain unaddressed.

As poverty increases, food assistance proportionately becomes a priority within Afghanistan. Access to healthcare and education decreases. Although physical safety increases, protection concerns abound as women and minorities lack freedom and access to justice. Returnees also face HLP issues and have unmet shelter and WASH needs. In Iran, new and already settled undocumented Afghans, fearing forced returns, try to remain invisible. Because of their lack of legal status, they do not receive humanitarian assistance.

Operational constraints

Bureaucracy is the primary constraint at the national level. Procedures for securing permission to undertake humanitarian activities are unclear and change regularly as central authorities balance the need against their desire to control. The facilitation of the approval process requires the building of relationships and trust between each humanitarian organisation and relevant government staff, which takes time; organisations with previous working relationships with the Taliban have an advantage.

At the local level, access negotiations vary widely, with many local authorities imposing more restrictive conditions than central authorities. Limitations to activities are also determined by local practices and the attitudes of single governors and local communities towards NGOs' goals and projects.

The freedom of female staff to work in the public sphere is restricted or subject to conditions in some areas. NGOs adopt community-led approaches and rely more on community leaders and elders to facilitate access and oversee the organisation of activities. Projects responding to local demands and with high levels of local buy-in have the most success. NGO programming becomes more discreet, necessitating a substantial reduction in scale and a more targeted approach. Organisations flexible enough to adapt to the new operating environment modify previous programming strategies to meet the challenges in a principled way and use lessons learned from previous decades of operations to update projects. Actors less prone to principled adaptation and less committed to learning increasingly face operational difficulties.



COMPOUNDING FACTORS

The above scenarios consider possible operational environments resulting from differing governance, (and, consequently, economic and security), approaches. Irrespective of which scenario(s) the actual future resembles, several other factors have the potential to significantly affect displacement and humanitarian access. These include:

Political factors

Afghan diaspora

Following the Taliban's entry to Kabul, many previously influential Afghans fled the country. After the intensification of fighting, several states suspended deportations to Afghanistan, while UNHCR issued a non-return advisory shortly after (*Al Jazeera* 12/08/2021; UNHCR 17/08/2021). How the already nuanced migration policies will change and be implemented in the future depends on security and political developments in Afghanistan.

Afghans abroad form an increasingly vocal diaspora opposed to Taliban rule. Should they unite and speak with one voice they have the potential to influence Western policy towards a Taliban-administered Afghanistan, including sanctions and economic and humanitarian support. The diaspora is also expected to provide significant financial support to many Afghans despite the complications of transferring money into the country. Even in scenario 1, where Western states engage positively with the de facto authorities, the diaspora could play an important role.

Regional politics

Policies from neighbouring countries, especially Iran and Pakistan, are likely to have a significant impact on any of the four scenarios presented. Their migration policies and military and political support for the Taliban and/or other Afghan actors can influence conflict dynamics (as illustrated in scenario 2) and future population movements, as well as facilitate or hinder the international recognition of the Taliban government, especially in scenario 1. Some old dynamics might also present themselves again. For instance, Pakistan already suggested the potential setting up of camps on the Afghan side of the border, not differently from the Shar Shahi camp built on Afghan soil with Pakistan's support in the 1990s (*Al Jazeera* 20/09/2021; UMCOR 17/11/2001). Pakistan, which has hosted the Taliban in past decades, has high stakes in the development of the interim government and can be expected to at least attempt to influence future Afghan political developments, as highlighted in scenarios 1, 2 and

3 (*Time* 18/08/2021). As power dynamics between Pakistan and the Taliban are in constant flux, the actual extent of this influence cannot be anticipated (*KII* 09/2021).

Future Iranian policies on the opening and continued closure of border crossings can also influence population movements in all scenarios. Tacit acceptance and tolerance from Iranian authorities of new undocumented Afghans could encourage further inflows from Afghanistan. Some take the risk of crossing the border through smuggling and other channels, while others might wait for Iran's next steps, such as the opening of camps, before migrating formally (*HRW* 09/09/2021). Iranian policies, however, are ultimately influenced by developments in Afghanistan.

Finally, the Taliban positioning – or lack thereof – on key geopolitical issues in nearby countries, including tensions in the Muslim-majority Indian Kashmir and the condition of Uighurs in the neighbouring Xinjiang province of China is likely to affect their political and economic relations with Pakistan, China, and India in all scenarios (*Time* 18/08/2021; *DW* 09/09/2021).

Global politics

While EU states have yet to clarify the number of resettled Afghans they will be hosting, their officials want to avoid large-scale displacement to Europe after the increased inflow of Syrian refugees in 2015 (*EEAS* 17/08/2021; *Financial Times* 18/08/2021; *European Commission* 18/08/2021). Policies they will be imposing might affect the migration opportunities of Afghans living in Pakistan and Iran, –especially in scenario 3, where onward migration is encouraged.

Other countries that had recognised the Taliban government back in the 1990s might now maintain a more ambiguous official diplomatic line (*The Economist* 11/09/2021). For instance, Saudi Arabia and Qatar could step up formal support for the interim government as in scenario 1 and, to a lesser extent, 4, or be less active as in other scenarios (*DW* 28/08/2021; *Reuters* 08/09/2021).

Conflict or diplomatic crises in other strategic arenas such as between Iran and the US or in the Korean peninsula would also turn global attention and planning away from Afghanistan, as it happened during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, potentially complicating any of the four scenarios.

Economic factors

Conditions of Afghanistan's informal and illicit economies⁶

The economy of Afghanistan sees some formal activities coexisting alongside very active informal and illicit sectors (NUPI 12/12/2017). While it is difficult to establish the actual size of the informal economy in Afghanistan, an approximation from 2015 showed that 80–90% of total economic activity was informal (SIPRI and NIR 10/2015). This estimate also included illicit activities, in contrast with the ILO definition adopted for this report. The country's informal and illicit economies have proven resilient and adaptable, relying on all kinds of smuggling and surviving multiple regime changes in the last decades. As such, they play a crucial role in people's livelihoods and have been a key source of income for the Taliban as well (ODI 30/11/2020). The size and extension of informal and illegal economies are crucial to consider in scenarios such as numbers 2, 3, and 4 where public financial institutions and the formal economy remain weak.

One key crop for the illicit economy is opium. A return to a ban on the opium trade seems unlikely despite recent Taliban declarations (Twitter accessed 28/09/2021, Asia Nikkei 02/09/2021). There is a small possibility for renewed attempts to eradicate poppy cultivations in a bid for international recognition, along the lines of the 2000 ban (Mansfield 04/2016). This could affect local livelihoods and employment opportunities. This is especially likely if there is no extensive socioeconomic planification ahead of it and alternative livelihood opportunities are not offered. Such dynamics could affect the levels of Taliban income in scenarios 3 and 4 and potentially fuel popular resentment towards the authorities.

Regional economy

The state of the regional economy is also likely to influence formal and informal immigration policies of neighbouring countries hosting Afghan refugees. Currently, Iran and Pakistan are categorised as lower-middle income economies, with Iran downgraded to this lower category in 2021 (WB accessed 28/09/2021). If in the next 18 months the Iranian economy experiences, or gives the impression of heading towards a more positive outlook with fewer sanctions and the reactivation of the job market –potentially related to renewed Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action talks (Al Jazeera 03/09/2021) then authorities might turn a blind eye on undocumented Afghans, who would support the economic momentum. While some Afghans enter Iran to escape the conflict, an improved Iranian economy would also attract those looking for better economic opportunities, particularly in scenario 3.

Global economy and commodity prices

A stable economic outlook, also related to economic growth in countries where COVID-19 outbreaks are successfully managed, would benefit Afghanistan, as opposed to economic disturbances that would cause the international community to lose interest in engaging with Afghanistan because of other pressing issues. In that case, the interim government itself would face even further economic and financial pressure.

Security factors

A major terrorist attack on the US or a US ally

If connected to one of the actors operating from Afghanistan, a major terrorist attack against the US or its allies would precipitate significant retaliation, likely including remote attacks on both IS-K and the Taliban leadership. The resumption of international military interventions in Afghanistan would destabilise it significantly, ultimately triggering a future akin to scenario 2.

The presence of mines and explosive devices

Plans for demining by the new administration, which also affect the future of the Afghan Directorate for Mine Action Coordination, are not public yet. Afghanistan had previously committed to reaching mine-free status by 2023 (UNMAS accessed 28/09/2021). IEDs and other explosive devices will keep hindering humanitarian access and threaten the safety of civilians in the months to come in all scenarios.

Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR)

Estimating the number of Taliban fighters is difficult because the ranks have swollen or shrunk based on seasonal patterns and there is no actual payroll (Carnegie 22/10/2009). The most accredited estimates point at a core group of 60,000 fighters, 90,000 members of local militias and tens of thousands of loosely categorised 'supporters' (CTC Sentinel 01/2021; Giustozzi 23/08/2017). The interim government has yet to outline plans for its fighters, either on the line of disarmament and demobilisation or their integration into a formal army or police structure. This issue, which requires a significant amount of resources and investments either way, is critical to the future safety and security in the country as the previous security

⁶ The distinction between informal and illicit economies is based on the definition of informal economy as "all economic activities by workers and economic units that are – in law or in practice – not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements" and that "does not cover illicit activities, in particular the provision of services or the production, sale, possession or use of goods forbidden by law, including the illicit production and trafficking of drugs, the illicit manufacturing of and trafficking in firearms, trafficking in persons, and money laundering, as defined in the relevant international treaties" (ILO 23/06/2015).

apparatus has disbanded, and only anecdotal evidence of isolated police officers returning to work has emerged so far (France 24 12/09/2021). Taliban officials have only recently given assurances that the country will have a new trained army but there are no indications of how this institution will be built in practice and with what resources it will be funded (Global Times 16/09/2021). Besides the Taliban, the issue of disarmament remains crucial from a security perspective as the country is awash in weapons (Time 28/07/2014). Thousands of armed personnel previously part of security forces are also no longer under state control.

Health and environmental factors

COVID-19 and other outbreaks

A new, more virulent, or more contagious strain of SARS-CoV-2 can cause additional suffering in Afghanistan and compound existing humanitarian needs. The Afghan health service is far from robust, only scenario 1 (and, to a lesser extent, 4) envisions sufficient investments to enable it to continue functioning at current levels. A collapse of the health system caused by the lack of funds, personnel, and resources would lead to the intensification of outbreaks and pre-existing conditions (besides COVID-19) and hinder the smooth completion of current vaccination campaigns, including for polio (WHO 06/09/2021; The New Humanitarian 06/09/2021).

Drought

More than three million Afghans have been acutely affected by drought in 2021 (NRC 09/06/2021). If rains are poor in 2022, 43% of employed Afghans working in the agriculture sector will require assistance (WB accessed 28/09/2021). Drought is a major driver of long-term displacement, especially urban migration. In all scenarios, poor rainfall in 2022 will drive additional displacement. If the government fails to provide or facilitate sufficient emergency response – as foreseen in scenarios 2, 3, and, to some extent, 4 – many people will choose to migrate. A drought would also severely affect opium crops and production and reduce the number of people employed in the sector, particularly in provinces like Helmand.

Iran would likewise be affected, as rivers flowing from Afghanistan would dry out. The country might then be even less capable of and prone to hosting newly displaced Afghans during a water crisis.

Other natural hazards

Of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, 21 are vulnerable to floods, with the western region and central belt at highest risk (SESRI 02/05/2014). Between 26 January and 28 July 2021, over 28,000 Afghans were affected by natural disasters (OCHA accessed 22/09/2021). Floods

can cause fatalities and result in short-term displacement. Earthquakes and landslides are also relatively common and they result in severe, if localised, destruction and casualties. Displacement caused by natural hazards happens regularly each year, but should an economic collapse or stalemate ensue in the upcoming months (as envisioned in scenario 3 and 4 respectively), response and coping capacities might be exhausted this time around. Almost all Afghans affected by a natural disaster would require assistance. With scenarios 2, 3, and 4 envisioning a government with limited resources, very limited local and/or national capacity for recovery will exist. In all scenarios, natural hazards such as the lack of or poor maintenance of roads and telecommunication services (especially in case of floods and harsh winters) will exacerbate structural obstacles to humanitarian access.

DISASTER TYPE IN AFGHANISTAN	RECORDED EVENTS (2010–2021)
Flood	38
Landslide	17
Earthquake	5
Storm	5
Drought	3
Extreme temperature	1

Source: EM-DAT accessed 12/09/2021

A QUICK OVERVIEW OF CONFLICT ACTORS

Warlords, local militias, and militarised communities have been historically involved in the conflict in Afghanistan and are still present in the country, even if many warlords who collaborated with foreign militaries have now left (The Conversation 06/09/2021). Besides them, the following actors remain active:

The Taliban

The Taliban are a predominantly Pashtun, conservative Islamic group that emerged among Afghan refugee students in Islamic religious schools (madrasas) in Northern Pakistan after the collapse of the country's communist regime in the 1980s. They ruled much of Afghanistan from 1996–2001. A US-led military coalition overthrew them for hosting Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. Since then, they have conducted an insurgency against the US-established Afghan Government. Since the withdrawal of most foreign forces from the country in 2014, they have expanded their influence, eventually taking over Kabul and the administration of the country on 15 August 2021. Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, a senior member from the founding generation, currently leads the group. It remains outwardly unified despite internal tensions. The Quetta Shura controls 11 provinces in the south, southwest, and west of the country,

while the Peshawar Shura controls 19 provinces. Both shuras have a presence in Kabul province and work in tandem. The two branches also exchange fighters on occasion to reinforce certain operations (CNN 24/08/2021; UNSC 01/06/2021).

The Haqqani Network is the most robust fighting force within the group. Some analysts consider the network a separate entity from the Taliban. Along with 3,000 to 10,000 traditional armed fighters active between the Khost, Paktia and Paktika provinces, a highly skilled technical team also belongs to the network and specialises in complex attacks. The network has a key role in the relationship between Al Qaeda and the Taliban (UNSC 01/06/2021; Congressional Research Service 17/08/2021).

Islamic State Khorasan Province

IS-K has been present in Afghanistan since 2015. The group has a decentralised structure made of small autonomous groups across Afghanistan with a shared ideology. IS-K retains a core group of 1,500 to 2,000 fighters in the Kunar and Nangarhar provinces. The core group in Kunar is made up of mainly Afghans and Pakistanis, while smaller groups located in Badakhshan, Kunduz and Sar-e-Pol are mostly local ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks. IS-K is focused on rebuilding its ranks by recruiting new members, mostly disaffected Taliban and foreign fighters. Their activities have been curbed and diminished in recent years after clashes with the Taliban as well as the military operations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Afghan forces leaving the group with less territory, manpower, leadership, and finances and affecting its ability to recruit and generate funding. Regardless, it continues to pose a threat in Afghanistan and the wider region (UNSC 01/06/2021; The New York Times 25/08/2021; The Conversation 26/08/2021; Wilson Centre 27/08/2021).

Al Qaeda

Al Qaeda maintains a presence in at least 15 Afghan provinces, mainly in east, south, and southeast Afghanistan. The group has close ties with the Taliban, but there is no open communication with their leaders to avoid endangering the Taliban's diplomatic position. Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) emerged as a separate Al Qaeda affiliate in 2014. Its local members are more active than senior Al Qaeda members in hiding. AQIS solidified its presence in Afghanistan by embedding its fighters among the Taliban. It can conduct attacks in the region, but lacks the capacity to do so outside (UNSC 01/06/2021; Congressional Research Service 17/08/2021).

The National Resistance Front of Afghanistan

After the Taliban takeover of Kabul conflict subsided across the country except in the Panjshir province where clashes broke between the NRF and the Taliban in late August and early September. The NRF, based in the mountainous Panjshir Valley, consists of mostly Tajik

fighters from local groups and former Afghan security forces (IICT 27/08/2021). They have been led by Ahmad Massoud and Amrullah Saleh, former Minister of Interior in the defunct Ghani government. While the Taliban declared taking control of the valley in early September, some NRF members are reportedly still present in remote areas. The scarcity of impartial reporting has made it difficult to discern actual conditions in the province (VOA 11/09/2021; Afghanistan Analysts Network 12/09/2021).

Afghan Armed Forces and Afghan National Police

Afghan security forces, including the army and the police, had a nominal 300,000 staff as at April 2021, although grave episodes of corruption and the enlisting of 'ghost' soldiers throughout the years meant their actual number was thought to be much lower (SIGAR 30/07/2021 and 30/07/2020). Aside from those currently in hiding, soldiers have left the country, joined the NRF, surrendered to the Taliban, or died in clashes, while others were injured in fighting. As for the police, some officers have also fled, been killed, or remain in hiding, especially former female officers (The Guardian 10/09/2021). Nonetheless, some personnel have returned to service at the airport (France 24 12/09/2020). The Taliban have yet to announce plans regarding the future composition and functioning of the security forces. Former state police and military forces might be recruited by other armed actors currently present or that would emerge in the country in the future.

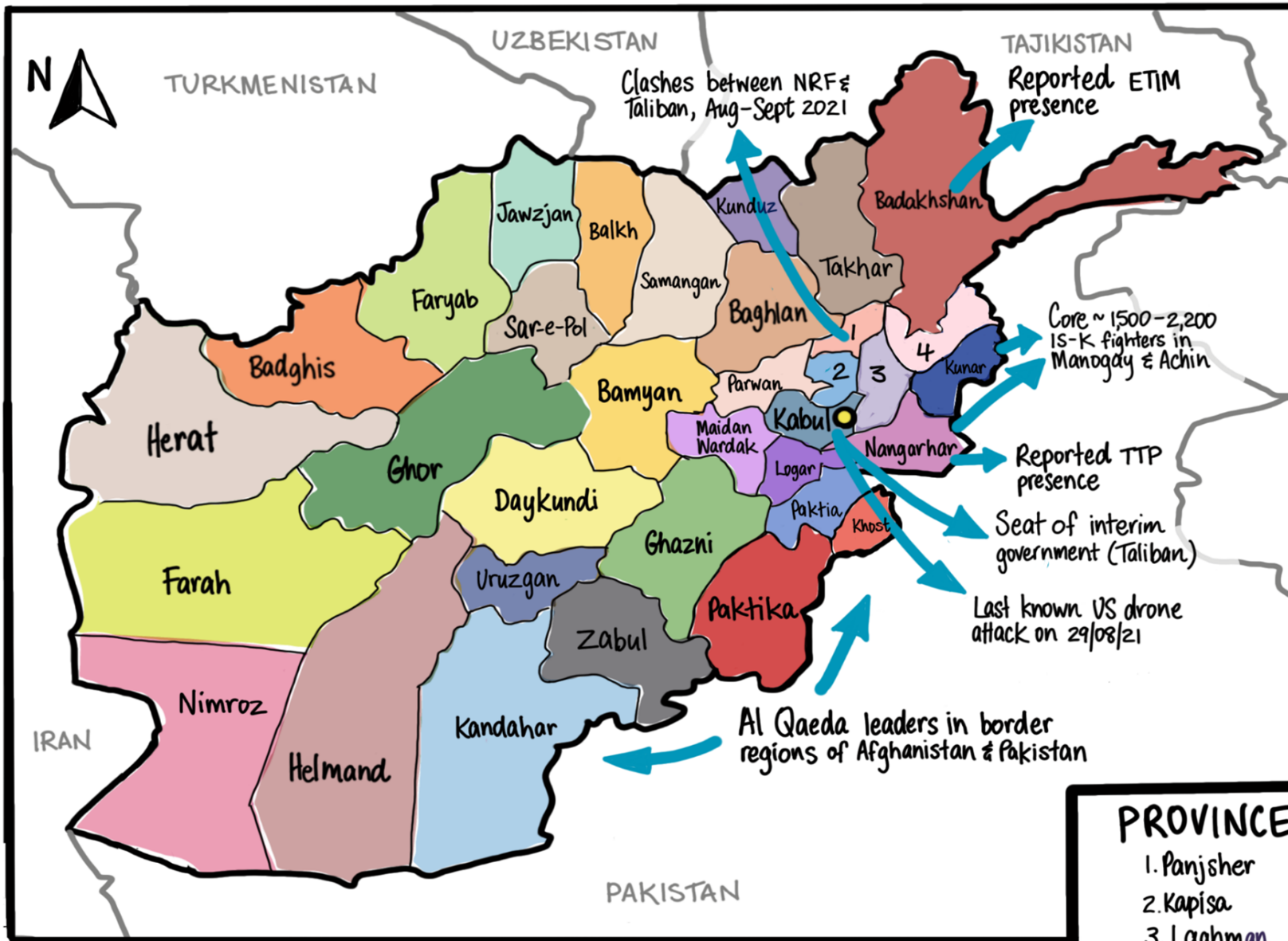
International military forces

While no longer physically present, international military forces are likely to maintain some overhead counterterrorism operations and still need reliable intelligence (The New York Times 15/04/2021). The latest of this kind of operations was staged by the US on 29 August, leading to the death of ten civilians. While Taliban officials have for the moment declined any offers of military assistance, both Qatar and Turkey have offered help to secure the premises of the airport and its functioning (Al Jazeera 14/09/2021).

Other non-state armed groups

With numbers of fighters ranging from few thousands to hundreds or dozens, several non-state armed groups have been reported as still active in Afghanistan, while being associated with conflict in other nations as well. Among these groups are Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is traditionally present in eastern Nangarhar, and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which is especially active in Badakhshan (UNSC 01/06/2021).

AFGHANISTAN



PROVINCES

1. Panjsher
2. Kapisa
3. Laghman
4. Nuristan

METHODOLOGY

ACAPS uses the chain of plausibility approach to scenario-building, as outlined in this [guidance note](#). While ACAPS staff normally use face-to-face workshops with context experts to proceed through a structured process of scenario-building, these scenarios were by necessity developed through remote working sessions, discussions, and document exchanges. The four main sessions involved:

- agreeing on the research question and current situation and mapping a wide array of variables that affect displacement and humanitarian access
- creating mini scenarios from seven of the 27 different combinations of assumptions on how the three main variables (governance, whether national, local, or both; international engagement; and conflict) might change in the next 18 months
- reviewing and further developing four among the most relevant and consequential scenarios.

Key terms used throughout the scenario-building process and the report are:

- variable: development or event likely to cause a change in a situation
- assumption: the direction that a variable can take (that is, increase, decrease, or no change)
- scenarios: verbal pictures of a possible future state based on assumptions (which may be more or less probable) on how key variables will change; may describe both the future state and the impact and consequences on people and society
- triggers: events that, should they occur, may contribute to a scenario materialising
- compounding factor: a development that can occur in parallel to any of the above scenarios and which has the potential to significantly change the nature of humanitarian response

A combination of the triggers (but not necessarily all) is required to reach any given scenario.

The estimated impact for each scenario was selected based on a scale of the approximate additional caseload that could result should that scenario unfold. Impact evaluations were designed to give only an order of magnitude and account for current displacement and refugee return trends.

Limitations

Scenarios can seem to oversimplify some issues as the analysis balances details against broader assumptions. Scenario-building is not an end in itself but instead a process for generating new ideas that should, in turn, lead to changes in the project design or decision-making. These scenarios focus primarily on:

- the potential movement of people within, to, and from Afghanistan and Iran
- the impact and humanitarian consequences for those moving
- the implications for humanitarian access.

These scenarios were elaborated in a period of high uncertainty and with limited data available on the key variables discussed, such as the governance structure of the new administration. Considering the high speed of developments, some of the information and events featured in the report might become obsolete upon or shortly after publication.

The estimated impact and probability of each scenario are subjective and based on the views of individual participants. They are the most useful as a guide in comparing the relative probabilities and impact of the scenarios and are indicative only.

Thank you

These scenarios were developed between August–September 2021 in conjunction with the Norwegian Refugee Council and with input from 11 other humanitarian or academic organisations and independent experts who contributed via their participation in online workshops, bilateral meetings, and/or reviews. ACAPS would like to thank all the organisations and experts that provided their input to these scenarios.

All illustrations by Sandie Walton-Ellery.

ANNEX 1 SCENARIO TRIGGERS

Scenario 1 = pragmatic governance; security and investment

Scenario 2 = divided governance; increasing conflict

Scenario 3 = pariah state; total economic collapse

Scenario 4 = repressive governance; increased aid dependency

Individual triggers are rarely sufficient to account for the unfolding of a whole scenario. In practice, a combination of triggers is usually required. By monitoring the triggers below, it is possible to determine the direction the crisis is moving towards and which scenario or scenarios are increasingly likely.

Some assumptions (e.g., no change to the current situation) are included as triggers for certain scenarios. In some cases, an assumption may also be possible for another scenario but is not included if not deemed a causal factor in determining the scenario. For example, the continuance of sanctions is seen as something that would bring about scenario 4. In scenarios 2 and 3, sanctions would continue but as a consequence of the scenario rather than a cause; thus, they are not considered a trigger for these scenarios.

SCENARIOS	1	2	3	4	BACKGROUND INFORMATION
Possible political/governance developments					
The interim government takes steps to transition to a more representative government by including significant non-Taliban representation.	X	X			While many national- and provincial-level positions remain to be assigned, the ministries of the interim government were allocated to senior Taliban figures, mostly Pashtun and all male, some of whom appear in international terrorist and/or sanction lists (Afghanistan Analysts Network 12/09/2021).
Internal disputes among the Taliban, especially around issues of inclusive governance, do not escalate as they maintain unity while seeking international recognition and eye the longer-term state building of the Emirate.	X				
The new administration has more open and outward-looking foreign policies compared to the 1990s.	X				A monolithic and fully codified vision of foreign policy within the Taliban does not exist, although they have attempted to diversify and expand their international contacts including the opening of the Doha political office in 2013 (PRIO 18/02/2021). The interim government has already nominated Mohammed Suhail Shaheen as its permanent UN representative (Geneva Solutions 22/09/2021).
The population welcomes improved levels of security provision (or perception thereof).	X				
The new administration crafts a positive narrative of security and basic service provision in urban and rural areas, persuading Afghans to stay in the country.	X				
The new administration shows more flexibility and changes in policymaking compared to the 1990s in matters of human rights, including the rights of women and minorities.	X				
Afghans with technical skills retain their previous jobs in the administration or gain new government employment.	X				Soon after taking control of Kabul, the Taliban called on male government employees to return to work. Among female staff, only those whose jobs could not be done by men were permitted to return. (Reuters 24/08/2021; The Guardian 19/09/2021).



Pressing issues such as counterterrorism and the provision of humanitarian assistance keep the international community, including Western and regional states, engaged with the new administration, even when its policies fall short of international demands.	X				The EU has already said that it would not recognise the Taliban government but that the bloc had much to gain from talking with the new administration (The Guardian 14/09/2021). The US has declared that it will be judging the new government based on its actions in terms of the freedom of movement of citizens, counterterrorism commitments, inclusivity and human rights (US State Department 09/09/2021; Euronews 09/09/2021).
Some countries, such as Pakistan, officially recognise the interim government.	X				
Women are excluded from the public sphere except for very limited involvement in education and healthcare service provision in gender-segregated, public-facing settings and when deemed necessary.			X		The extent and conditions of women's and girls' access to public life in the future are not fully clear. Many women have stopped working because they were barred by authorities from accessing their workplace or because they fear retaliation (Amnesty International 21/09/2021). While the Taliban have allowed boys in all grades and girls between grades one and six to return to school in September, they have yet to allow girls between grades seven and 12 back (UN News 24/09/2021). It is unclear when they will be allowed in the classroom again (Reuters 21/09/2021).
The interim government remains in place with only cosmetic changes.				X	
The Taliban remain united by becoming more decentralised				X	
Possible economic developments					
Some sanctions are lifted.	X				The US Treasury Department announced on 24 September that it had issued a license allowing the US Government, NGOs, and certain international organisations, including the UN, to engage in transactions with the Taliban or Haqqani Network – both under sanctions – that are necessary to provide humanitarian assistance. On the other hand, China has called for sanctions to be lifted as soon as possible (Pajhwok 25/09/2021, Bloomberg 24/09/2021)
Some countries, such as Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, continue or even scale up investments and provide some financial and technical support to the government.	X				
Off-budget aid funding continues through humanitarian funding streams.	X				Off-budget aid is “any assistance spent by a donor partner and implementing agency outside of the government’s national budget; because the funds bypass the core national budget, the government has no control over these funds” (Wardak 02/2016). As at 2019, USD 5.7 billion of public expenditure were covered through ‘off-budget’ projects (WB 29/07/2019).
Development funds channelled to development actors such as UN agencies are scaled up, with a focus on infrastructure and other projects. In the short term off-budget trust funds are used to avoid direct money transfer to Taliban authorities.	X				
Western states use humanitarian and development funds as a pressure point to influence the new administration.	X				
The US unfreezes the Afghan central bank's assets	X				The US froze nearly USD 9.5 billion in assets belonging to the Afghan central bank and stopped cash shipments to the nation in August 2021 (Business Standard 19/08/2021)
WB and IMF restart aid to Afghanistan	X				The WB paused disbursements in their operations in Afghanistan on 25 August 2021, a week after the IMF halted Afghanistan's access to IMF funds (The Diplomat 26/08/2021). The process for restarting on-budget development funding from WB and IMF will likely require more than 18 months to bear fruit.



Pakistan recognises the interim government and shores it with funds to secure its leverage.		X	X		Pakistan officials have recently encouraged the international community to remain engaged with the de facto authorities, while recognising the need to keep the interim government accountable for its promises (VOA 24/09/2021).
The lack of functioning, formal banking institutions hinders the economic engagement of most countries.		X	X		
China engages with the interim government partially resuming exploration and usage of mines.			X		China's cautious engagement with the Taliban started before the 15 August takeover, for example in official meetings held with Taliban officials in July 2021. While China has offered small amounts of emergency aid and vaccine doses to Afghanistan, the full extent of its future engagement is unclear. The Taliban have previously announced that they look at China as a key economic partner (East Asia Forum 25/09/2021, BBC 09/09/2021).
Additional international sanctions are imposed on the Taliban government.			X		
No significant bilateral funding is provided to the Afghan central bank		X	X		
IMF and WB do not restart development funding		X	X	X	
Sanctions remain				X	
Mechanisms to enable humanitarian funds to enter the country are put in place				X	
Possible security developments					
Taliban fighters are gainfully re-employed.	X			X	
Public protests against the interim government increase.		X			The Taliban have violently suppressed protests in Kabul and have made announcements to effectively ban any future protests (France 24 09/09/2021)
The factionalisation of the Taliban across the country creates local power vacuums.		X			The many factions within the Taliban have disparate views about how the new regime should rule across just about all dimensions of governance. Maintaining unity will be more challenging in government than it was during the conflict. (Brookings 31/08/2021)
Conflicts between the Taliban and other groups increase.		X			
The Pakistan Taliban expand into eastern Afghanistan.		X			
Relations between Pakistan and India deteriorate.		X			
External support to and the capability of IS-K, NRF, and/or other groups increases.		X			
Foreign military forces resume remote operations inside Afghanistan.		X			
Retaliation and reprisals against former opponents, activists, journalists, media personalities and minorities are documented.			X		Despite initial Taliban reassurances on the respect of rights and freedoms, several human rights groups have already reported violations affecting women, journalists, and human rights defenders since the Taliban takeover of the country (Amnesty International 21/09/2021). Events in the upcoming months will show whether these turn into consistent, long-term trends.



No significant conflict is observed within Afghanistan			X	
Other possible developments				
Access to basic services significantly deteriorates.		X		
Livelihood opportunities decrease further because of droughts, attempts to reduce poppy cultivation, and other reasons.		X		The current drought is affecting one-third of the country territory, particularly the western, northern and southern provinces, while the 2018-2019 drought was limited to western areas (OCHA 05/09/2021; ACTED 10/09/2021). In the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) projections for the June–November period, preceding the international military withdrawal, already 9.5 million Afghans were expected to be experiencing Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or higher levels of food insecurity (IPC Info 04/2021). The drought is expected to affect access to livelihoods and food, mainly by endangering crop production and livestock farming (OCHA 05/09/2021). As for a possible reduction or ban on opium cultivation, which some Taliban officials have declared supporting, the policy would come at a high social and economic cost (France 24 19/08/2021, Brookings 15/09/2021). Some international experts claim a full ban remains unlikely (Nikkei Asia 02/09/2021, Brookings 15/09/2021).
Neighbouring countries maintain borders open only to Afghans already possessing official documentation.		X		As at 16 September, the border crossing that had the most flexible policies in terms of the passage of Afghan pedestrians was the Spin Boldak/Chaman crossing between Afghanistan and Pakistan (UNHCR 21/09/2021). Other border crossings implement restrictions on entry of Afghan pedestrians into their respective countries, with the minimum requirement of possessing a visa and a passport (UNHCR 21/09/2021).
No large-scale third-country resettlement scheme is implemented.		X		
Taliban authorities impose very restrictive conditions on humanitarian actors.			X	