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Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis impacts over 90 percent of its population, necessitating international aid amid refugee returns and natural disasters.



In Afghanistan, the De-Facto Authorities of the Taliban prioritize economic growth with support for local businesses, infrastructure projects, oil extraction as well as education reforms and health initiatives.



The Taliban govern Afghanistan, having suspended the 2004 constitution, while facing internal and external challenges, as well as lacking international recognition.



Contents

- Introduction 1
- Political Situation 2
- Ongoing Projects under the De Facto Authorities 5
- Humanitarian Situation 7
- Human Rights and Women’s Rights..... 10
- Economic Situation 11
- Foreign Relations 17
- Security Situation 20
- Opinion: 22
 - What ails Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations? 22
 - Rethinking the EU’s relationship with Afghanistan..... 26
- Endnotes 30

Acronyms

AFJC	Afghanistan Journalists Center
AFN	Afghani (national currency)
ETIM	Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement
FES	Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan
IEA	Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISKP	Islamic State Khorasan Province
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
TTP	Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

Introduction

The Afghanistan Monitor, a regular publication by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Pakistan, provides in-depth coverage of Afghanistan's political, economic, security, and humanitarian landscape since the rise of the Taliban. The Sixth Edition of the Monitor delves into developments from January 2024 till the first week of March 2024, offering expert analyses.

Since August 15, 2021, the situation in Afghanistan has been continuously evolving following the assumption of power by the Taliban as the de facto authorities. Over the past two years, a subtle understanding has emerged regarding the Taliban's governing approach, which can be characterized as a blend of authoritarian policies and selective pragmatism.

Despite establishing its presence throughout the country, uncertainties persist regarding the state of governance and the protection of women/human rights under the de facto Taliban rule, as well as the potential security threats emanating from Afghanistan.

Similarly, there are mixed outlooks of the Afghan economy, with some areas suggesting improvement such as revenue collection, the elevation of the value of the Afghan currency (Afghani), and enhancing trade with neighboring and regional countries.

However, at the same time, a decrease in humanitarian aid, lack of employment opportunities, and the reported deportation and return of Afghan refugees, primarily from Pakistan, have further exacerbated the economic situation.

Furthermore, a worrisome element that continues to overshadow the Taliban's asserted accomplishments is the continuous violation of women and human rights. Imposing restrictions on education and employment opportunities for women not only violates their fundamental rights but also dampens the international community's willingness to engage with the Taliban. This has also hindered the efforts of UN agencies and non-governmental organizations in addressing Afghanistan's significant humanitarian crisis and development challenges.

Over the last decades, Afghanistan has been grappling with these substantial challenges stemming from prolonged conflict, economic collapse, internal displacement, widespread poverty, food scarcity, and limited access to healthcare. The situation has been further exacerbated by natural disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the return of Afghan refugees, which have significantly escalated humanitarian needs. Consequently, Afghanistan remains one of the world's most severe humanitarian disasters, with approximately two-

thirds of its population facing food insecurity.

As a diplomatic effort to stay relevant, the Taliban are currently making a conscious effort to integrate into the international community, marking a significant shift from their isolation in the late 1990s. Although the Taliban have established themselves as the de facto political authority in Afghanistan, they have yet to secure formal recognition from the international community. Challenges persist in their quest for political and social cohesion, particularly concerning inclusivity and the representation of ethnic minorities.

Despite improvements in the security situation within Afghanistan, i.e. decrease in terror attacks, the escalating threats from transnational terrorist groups - such as the Al-Qaida, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) - remain a substantial risk to the stability of both Afghanistan and the broader region.¹ While these groups pose threats to the Taliban, the neighboring countries of Afghanistan are equally concerned about them. Despite the Taliban's assurances to prevent Afghan soil from becoming a safe haven for international terrorist organizations, the recent reports by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) have raised serious concerns about the Taliban's commitment to effectively addressing such threats.²

In brief, the Taliban are in the process of transitioning from insurgency to administration. However, their quest for international recognition as the legitimate representatives of Afghanistan is hindered by their reluctance to honor commitments regarding human and women's rights, adherence to global norms, and assurances on counter-terrorism. This reluctance was highlighted when the Taliban declined participation in the recent UN meeting in Doha as they were not invited as the "sole representatives" of Afghanistan - as per their demand. Thus, this stance poses obstacles to engagement in Afghanistan as a whole.

Political Situation

Since August 2021, the Taliban have functioned as the de facto authority in Afghanistan, employing an approach heavily influenced by their specific interpretation of Sharia law. Initially, there was uncertainty regarding the group's governance style, but shortly after taking control, the interim arrangement implemented by the Taliban clearly reflects certain elements of the governance system of the Taliban during their previous rule in the 1990s. This includes the presence of a supreme leader, a prime minister, and the maintenance of relevant ministries of the former government - with the exception of the Women's Ministry, which has

been replaced by the Ministry of Vice and Virtue.

Shortly after taking control, the Taliban chose to suspend the 2004 Afghan constitution, which had previously served as the governing framework. Since then, the Taliban have neither abolished the old constitution nor have they declared a new one. However, they claim that they are in the process of drafting a new constitution and legal framework based on the principles of Sharia.³

While the Taliban have prioritized certain goals for their interim set up (such as improving governance heavily influenced by Sharia and economic affairs) before they are in a position to establish a constitution, concerns persist as they continue to operate without a legal structure i.e. constitution. In this regard, speaking at a ceremony in Khost in February, the Afghan acting interior minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani, stressed upon the adoption and implementation of Sharia law as a basis for the group's overall governance and legal posture.⁴ Nevertheless, it is crucial to emphasize that there are uncertainties not only regarding the future governance structure but also the legal framework in Afghanistan.

At the governance level, the Taliban have directed their efforts toward real governance, institutional changes and remodeling, as well as constructing state institutions, including those

related to security. However, they have not implemented significant alterations to the ministries established by the previous government, except for renaming the women's ministry as the Ministry of Vice and Virtue. The interim Afghan ministers currently head 19 Afghan ministries.⁵

While the existing Afghan administration is predominantly male and primarily Pashtun, the Taliban have designated nine non-Pashtun members from the Uzbek, Tajik, and Hazara ethnic communities to the cabinet.⁶ In the middle and low-ranking public offices, the group has also kept individuals from the previous Afghan set-up, as according to them, more than 500,000 individuals from the previous set-up have been retained, including 513 ex-ministers, governors and deputy governors.⁷ Nevertheless, the exclusion of women and various ethnic and political segments of society, including civil society, from the policy-making process raises significant concerns regarding the Taliban's commitments to establishing an inclusive, accountable, and responsible government.^{8, 9}

As a part of the Taliban's focus on governance, particularly institution changes and reforms, in an effort to rehabilitate prisoners, the Afghan Taliban have transformed the central prison of Zabul province into an education center. In February, nearly 70 inmates graduated after

completing a 9-month literacy program.¹⁰

Similarly, the Taliban are also focusing on security and strengthening law enforcement agencies throughout the country with particular focus on the north. In a bid to ensure public order and thwart crimes in the country, the Taliban have also been increasing recruitment in the police force. According to the spokesperson for the Panjshir police, Abadullah Aqa Farooqi, noted a substantial decrease in the crime rates in the province. He further noted that in the month of Hamal - a month of a solar calendar used in Afghanistan, which typically starts on March 21st of each year - only 40 cases were reported across seven districts and the provincial capital.¹¹

Similarly, as a part of the Taliban's upgradation and training of the military through an initiative of the Afghan Chief of Staff,¹² in February, 2024, in Badakhshan, 350 soldiers took training in weapons, investigation, and Islamic education from the Omar Salis Division.¹³

So far, contrary to their previous practices, the Taliban have been relatively successful in maintaining peace and stability in Afghanistan, as the group has been facing limited resistance across the country, and as a subsequence, has moved away from using violence.

Since the Taliban's return to power, the group has largely remained united – with Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, the supreme leader of the Taliban, holding absolute control and influence over the group's governance and decision-making processes. Despite certain disagreements on girls' education and the restriction of women from NGO employment, the group has maintained overall unity, pledging allegiance to Haibatullah, who has successfully established a degree of centralized authority in governance across Afghanistan, offering the populace with basic facilities and economic stability.

To manage the affairs of the provincial administrations, the group has established various Ulema Councils in every province, which interact with religious, sectarian and ethnic minorities in the country.¹⁴ The Taliban have actively participated in meetings with ethnic and religious minorities, including Sikhs and the Shia community, held in various parts of the country. While the Taliban's policy toward Shia Muslims was oppressive during their previous rule, since returning to power, they have consciously worked to prevent a sectarian divide. This is evident in their appointments of Shias to the cabinet,¹⁵ engagement with Shia clerics, and active participation in Muharram observances (commemorating the death of Prophet Muhammad's

grandson, Hussain Ibn Ali).¹⁶ However, in January 2024, despite repetitive efforts by the members of the Shia Ulema Council, the Afghan Supreme leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada, showed no interest in meeting them. The Council has already given 20 demands, including the formal recognition of the Shia Jafari school, to the Afghan Taliban.¹⁷

Ongoing Projects under the De Facto Authorities

After assuming power, the Taliban have been seeking opportunities to stimulate economic and infrastructure development in Afghanistan. They are pursuing this through a combination of domestic initiatives and the attraction of foreign investments.

Therefore, under the Afghan Ministry of Economic Affairs, the National Procurement Commission of Afghanistan approved 24 new projects at the beginning of the current year. Valued at nearly 10 billion Afghanis (about 126 million EUR), most of the projects are related to the ministries of Interior Affairs, National Defense, Public Health, and others. Significant among these projects involve the construction of the Paranda Panjshir micro-hydroelectric dam, the accomplishment of the Tori dam in Zabul province, and the construction of road, electricity and

communication networks across the country.¹⁸ Similarly, on 23 January, the Economic Commission of Afghanistan announced the construction of the second Kabul-Jalalabad road. The Commission directed the Ministry of Public Works to open a bidding process for the road.¹⁹ The first Kabul-Jalalabad road was completed in January 2023 with a total spending of 25 million Afghanis (about 320.000 EUR).²⁰

Similarly, on February 20, 2024, construction work on the second phase of the 177 km long (110 miles) Qosh Tepa Canal was started.²¹ The second phase of the Canal extends from the Dawlat Abad district of Balkh province to the Andkhoy district of Faryab province. Earlier, the first phase of the Canal, nearly 108 km long, was completed in October 2023.²² The second phase would be completed in a year.²³

In January 2024, the Taliban extracted nearly 60,000 tons of crude oil from the Qashqari wells in the Amu Darya region, which was auctioned by the Afghan Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, generating around US\$27 million. According to Shahabudin Dilawar, the acting Minister of Mines and Petroleum, one barrel of crude oil will be sold at US\$24.80 less than the price at international markets. It is reported that overall 100,000 tons of crude oil is extracted daily from the Amu Darya region, and the Taliban aim to increase extraction by

200,000 tons through the digging up of 4 new wells in the region, to not only become self-sufficient for its domestic needs but also to export large amounts.²⁴

In the educational sector the Afghan Ministry of Education stated that the country's madrasas and schools' curriculum needs to be in line with global standards; therefore, technical reforms are underway. Moreover, with the support from three aid agencies, nearly 800 new community classes are opened in Kunduz province where nearly 27,000 children are getting education who live too far away from existing public schools.²⁵ Similarly, in February, the Afghan Ministry of Education stated that it has identified and culled 700 "ghost schools" - schools that exist only on paper - across the country.²⁶ The efforts were appreciated by the teachers across the country, as they said that such schools should be removed from the official lists of the ministry. Currently, there are more than 18,000 primary, secondary and high schools, and 260,000 teachers in the country.²⁷ Earlier, Abbas Stanakzai, the deputy Foreign Minister for Afghanistan, said that educational institutions should provide better learning opportunities for the Afghan youth. He further noted that the authorities should provide libraries and books, so that anyone can "study without any kind of controversy."²⁸

In the health sector, the Taliban have also taken steps at different levels. Being one of the two countries with Polio cases in the world, Afghanistan underwent a nationwide polio campaign with a target of vaccinating 7.5 million children younger than five years of age on 29th January, 2024.²⁹ Similarly, on 26th February 2024, the second phase of the vaccination was initiated. According to the Afghan Ministry of Health, it aims to vaccinate children in 21 of the 34 provinces of the country, including those who came back from the neighboring countries. The Ministry, on 8th February, has also opened the first polio eradication laboratory in Kabul, as it aims at eradicating polio by 2024 in the country.³⁰ Earlier, all the polio samples were sent to Pakistan, thus increasing the amount of time and money spent; however, now the Afghans can test the samples in the country by themselves.³¹ For the years 2022 and 2023, Afghanistan reported two and six cases of polio, respectively.³²

Earlier, between January 1st and 27th, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported nearly 160,756 cases of severe respiratory infection, of which 383 people died, across the country.³³ The Organization further noted that nearly 62.9 percent of these patients were children under the age of five, and a total of 49.3 percent of patients were females.³⁴ According to the health officials in the Paktia Province,

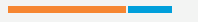
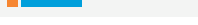
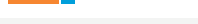
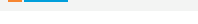
nearly 20 children in the province die every month due to unavailability of hospital beds and seasonal diseases.³⁵ Last year, Afghanistan faced humanitarian problems exacerbated due to earthquakes in several regions of the country. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), nearly 96,000 Afghan children were affected in Herat province only.³⁶ From 7th to 15th October 2023, the province jolted as a result of a series of earthquakes, which resulted in nearly 1500 deaths, 2100 injuries, and 3330 destroyed homes.³⁷ In this regard, with a cost of nearly 120 million Afghani (about 1.5 million. EUR), the province's local government has built 387 homes by January 2024 in 13 villages of the affected province. However, the lack of health and sanitary services is still a problem in these villages and needs to be solved.³⁸

Humanitarian Situation

Afghanistan is still one of the countries which is facing a dire humanitarian

situation. With a population of 43 million, the country confronts one of the most significant and severe humanitarian crises on a global scale - primarily due to decades of war and violence, as it is now trying to grapple with crises emerging due to climate change, natural disasters and poor economic outlook etc.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) there are 23.7 million people - over half of the Afghan population - who are in need of life-saving assistance in 2024.³⁹ However, this number has decreased from 28.3 million people in need during 2023. Moreover, the humanitarian partners need US\$3.06 billion as they have prioritized nearly 17.3 million Afghans in different areas for the year, who should receive a "well-coordinated multi-sectoral assistance". In this regard, the key priorities include the provision of food, drinking water, healthcare facilities, education; and addressing acute water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) needs.

SECTOR / CLUSTER	PEOPLE IN NEED	PEOPLE TARGETED	% OF PEOPLE TARGETED	
 Water, Sanitation and Hygiene	21.1	9.7	46%	
 Protection	20.8	6.0	29%	
 Health	17.9	12.8	71%	
 Food Security and Agriculture	15.8	15.8	100%	
 Education	8.0	1.4	17%	
 Nutrition	7.4	5.6	76%	
 Emergency Shelter and NFI	6.6	1.7	26%	

People in need and people targeted by sector/cluster⁴⁰

The crisis is exacerbating due to the return of Afghan refugees from neighboring countries. Until December 2023, nearly 1.9 million Afghans returned to Afghanistan, including over 471,000 from Pakistan.⁴¹ Similarly, OCHA estimated that in 2024 nearly 1.46 million Afghans are expected to return to their country from neighboring Pakistan and Iran.⁴² Most cross-border migration primarily takes place through the Torkham and Spin Boldak-Chaman crossings. United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) noted that between 15th September and 27th January, more than 508,000 reportedly deported and returning refugees were registered.⁴³ The International Organization for Migration (IOM) anticipates that between November 2023 and July 2024, approximately 720,000 undocumented Afghan migrants and 50,000 Afghans voluntarily returning to their home country will require assistance.⁴⁴ Thus, to provide health support to the returnees, WHO and its 25 Health Cluster partners gave services to a total of 272,133 returnees, including 98,017 women, 73,642 men, 52,409 girls, and 48,065 boys. Of the total beneficiaries, 142,284 individuals received primary services, 20,454 received secondary services, and 67,734 were provided with health promotion activities etc.⁴⁵

Thus, OCHA noted that as a realization of transformation from traditional mode of humanitarian assistance to targeting basic human needs, it will require efforts to focus on the enhancement of linkages between humanitarian needs and development actions. Otherwise, it would not be possible to evade the successive cycles of humanitarian relief and achieve enhanced self-sufficiency of communities.⁴⁶

In another report by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), it was noted that by March 2024 nearly 15.8 million people in Afghanistan are predicted to face acute food insecurity - an addition of 500,000 people as compared to 2023.⁴⁷ The IPC noted that the food security situation is expected to deteriorate as a result of increased prices and reduced purchasing ability amongst Afghans, particularly during the winter season when adverse weather conditions in the country restrict employment opportunities and escalate transportation expenses.⁴⁸

Similarly, in January 2024, UNICEF noted that nearly 100,000 children in Afghanistan are in need of humanitarian assistance⁴⁹ in the wake of a series of earthquakes that struck parts of the country in the later quarter of 2023.⁵⁰ In order to meet the basic humanitarian needs of 19.4 million Afghans, including 10.5 million children, UNICEF asked

for an urgent provision of \$1.4 billion in 2024.⁵¹ Furthermore, the financial assistance will also go towards facilitating the provision of primary health care services to 19.4 million individuals,⁵² life-saving protection services to 3.6 million children and caregivers. Additionally, it will enable 5.5 million people to access safe water and deliver life-saving treatment for severe wasting to 815,000 children under the age of 5. Currently, due to economic hurdles, nearly 8 million Afghan children receive no education. Therefore, UNICEF plans to expand life-saving interventions, enhance access to critical health services for the most vulnerable, deliver a comprehensive package of Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) services to address acute humanitarian needs, concentrate on reinforcing community-based education, and offer comprehensive services to children facing acute needs by providing mental health and psychosocial support.⁵³

Citing the grave humanitarian conditions in the country, several international aid agencies and countries have contributed to various funds for Afghanistan. In January 2024, Denmark provided nearly US\$6.2 million to the United Nations Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan (STFA).⁵⁴ Similarly, in February 2024, the World Food Program (WFP) stated that a total sum of US\$36.5

million was allocated by the UK and Northern Ireland to Afghanistan through the channel of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The donation will aim at addressing the humanitarian needs of over 2 million Afghans during the winter season; one million will receive 13,000 metric tons of wheat flour and other edibles, whereas the remaining one million will receive cash transfers.⁵⁵ In the previous year, WFP provided assistance to more than 18 million Afghans.⁵⁶

Moreover, to deal with HIV, tuberculosis (TB), and malaria, emergency funds of US\$4.7 million were allocated by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria in Afghanistan. The funding was allocated to provide health services to the Afghan refugees returning from Pakistan. This funding is in line with the grant of US\$66 million, allocated on 1st January 2024, by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).⁵⁷

Human Rights and Women's Rights

In defiance of persistent requests from the international community, the Taliban have fallen short in addressing concerns related to women and human rights. Despite initially pledging to uphold women's rights in accordance with Islamic law and supporting women's access to education and involvement in public life, the group swiftly deviated from these commitments upon assuming power.

Therefore, keeping in line with their previous policies towards women and girls, the Taliban have again issued *hijab* (head covering) guidelines in the eighteenth district of Kabul in January 2024. The guidelines, issued after the meeting between the school principals and representatives of the Ministry of Vice and Virtue in Kabul, stated that females should not wear clothes that are too short/tight or scarves that do not cover their hair.⁵⁸ However, it is reportedly believed that the Taliban's actions are aimed at creating fear among the masses and keeping women at home.

According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) report *Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan (October - December 2023)*, the Taliban have arrested a number of females for violating the hijab decree. Most

of them were released after the signing of guarantee papers by their respective *mahrams* (in Islam, a *mahram* is a family member with whom marriage would be considered permanently unlawful) in Dasht-e Barchi and Panjshir. UNAMA noted that the detention of women who are not adhering to *hijab* guidelines goes against the decree issued by the Taliban themselves. The procedure followed by a violation of the decree, issued by the de facto authorities, notes: after the first violation, the female's *mahram* would be issued a warning; after the second violation, the *mahram* would be summoned by the Taliban; following a third violation, the *mahram* may face a three-day imprisonment; however, after the fourth violation, the *mahram* has to be presented before the de facto court.⁵⁹ The same report, published on 23rd January 2024, highlighted that unmarried or females without a *mahram* are barred by the Taliban from traveling, visiting hospitals or joining workplaces. In this regard, the Taliban are suggesting that single women should get married if they want to keep their jobs or undertake long-distance journeys.⁶⁰

Similar criticism was also raised during the Munich Security Conference (MSC) from 16th to 18th February when 12 Foreign Ministers of European countries gave a joint statement regarding the violations of human rights in Afghanistan.

However, the Taliban refuted their claims and said that such efforts are being made by the “countries that failed in Afghanistan” to create a damaging picture of the country.⁶¹

After coming into power, the Afghan Taliban also took suppressive steps against the Afghan media houses and journalists. Even though, supporting the rights of media and journalists, Mawlawi Abdul Kabir, the Afghan Deputy Prime Minister for Political Affairs, said that Afghans have freedom of speech in accordance with Islamic laws, the ground situation suggests otherwise.⁶² According to the Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Afghanistan is one of the most dangerous places for journalists; as in 2023, the Taliban jailed 23 journalists. By February 2024, the RSF noted the detention of three journalists in the country.⁶³ Ranking Afghanistan in 152nd position out of 180 countries in its World Press Freedom Index 2023, the RSF condemned the Taliban’s “unacceptable persecution of the media.” Similarly, on January 27, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) criticized the arrest of the Afghan journalists by calling the Taliban’s actions a “crackdown” on Afghan media.⁶⁴ On the contrary, the de facto government has rejected the findings of the RSF report by accusing it of pursuing its “own agenda to spread propaganda against countries.”⁶⁵ The Afghan spokesman for the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Zabiullah

Mujahid, said that apart from some problems created by the group Islamic State (IS/Daesh), “Afghanistan is the safest place for the journalists.”⁶⁶ Currently, the Afghan media is facing problems regarding the country’s media laws under the Afghan Taliban. The journalists and media personnel have shown concerns about issues related to access to information and their arbitrary detentions.⁶⁷

Furthermore, the Afghan Taliban have been accused of running private prisons across the country. However, the Afghan deputy head of the Office of the Prison Administration, Habibullah Badar, said that there is no private prison in the country, as all the surveillance houses are being managed by the Afghan intelligence directorate. He further stated that, by January 2024, there were 19,000 prisoners - including 800 women - across different prisons in the country for different crimes.⁶⁸

Economic Situation

Since August 2021, the Taliban have been redirecting their focus towards the economy, as the Taliban’s de facto government is trying to boost revenue collection, elevate the market value of the Afghan currency, and enhance trade relations with neighboring and regional countries. However, according to a Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Rehabilitation

(SIGAR) report, the Afghan economy is facing renewed challenges, as the situation has been exacerbated by a decrease in humanitarian aid, lack of employment opportunities, and the return of Afghan refugees.⁶⁹

Currency:

Even though the Afghan economy has shrunk in the last two years, the Afghan currency, the Afghani (AFN), remained stable, mainly due to continuous cash shipments for humanitarian aid services, inflow of remittances, and a higher supply of US dollars compared to the local currency.⁷⁰ Another reason for the Afghani's stability involved the auction of millions of dollars by the central bank of the country, Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB). In a similar tender activity, on 31st January, 2024, the DAB was set to auction US\$17 million, in which various banks and money exchange companies were to participate.⁷¹ Similarly, in various provinces of the country, e.g. in Nimruz Province, people have been barred from using any foreign currency in their transactions and businesses. In Nimruz, a province near the Iranian border, people use Iranian Toman for their daily transactions. However, the recent ban has ordered legal consequences against those who failed to comply with the instructions.⁷²

Unemployment:

Furthermore, given the unstable nature of the Afghan economy, the rate of unemployment in Afghanistan is rising. According to the Biruni Institute, since August 2021, the rate of unemployment in Afghanistan has seen a surge of 31 and 8 percent among men and women, respectively. As the unemployment rate has increased by 40 percent in urban areas in the last two years, the assessment by the Institute found out that due to their challenging economic situations, people are liquidating or selling their properties and other valuable assets.⁷³ However, in January 2024, as a positive step, 38 engineering graduates of Geology and Mining of Kabul Polytechnic University were provided jobs in mining companies by the Taliban Ministry of Mining and Petroleum.⁷⁴

Poppy Cultivation:

One main reason behind the unemployment in the country is due to the Taliban's crackdown on the opium production in the country. According to the 2023 report by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), poppy cultivation in Afghanistan has declined exponentially from the harvest of US\$1.4-2.7 billion in 2021 down to US\$190–260 million in 2023 - a total reduction of 90 percent.⁷⁵ However,

the downside of the ban resulted in the loss of means of earnings for many Afghans. Therefore, experts fear that the inability of the Taliban to provide suitable earning alternatives for Afghan farmers could result in the re-cultivation of poppy fields, as since the ban in 2022, almost 400,000 livelihoods associated with poppy cultivation have been facing a potential loss. Earlier, in January 2024, Mohammad Yaqoob Mujahid, the Afghan interim Defense Minister, announced that the ministry had destroyed 4,472 tons of narcotics, arrested 8,282 individuals involved in production and smuggling, and cleared nearly 13,904 hectares of poppy crops across the country.⁷⁶

Notwithstanding the Taliban's promises regarding a substantial reduction in the illicit drug production in Afghanistan, the Tajikistan Drug Control Agency contradicts these assurances. According to the agency, drug trafficking from Afghanistan remains a concern, with purported laboratories identified along the border regions of both nations, leading to the discovery of approximately 2.5 tons of narcotics in 2023.⁷⁷ Earlier, during a meeting with the EU Chargée d'Affaires in Afghanistan, Ambassador Raffaella Iodice, in January 2024, Mawlawi Abdul Kabir, the Afghan Deputy Prime Minister for Political Affairs, said that in Afghanistan narcotics and

corruption have ended.⁷⁸ However, the reality seems to be somehow different on ground.

Corruption:

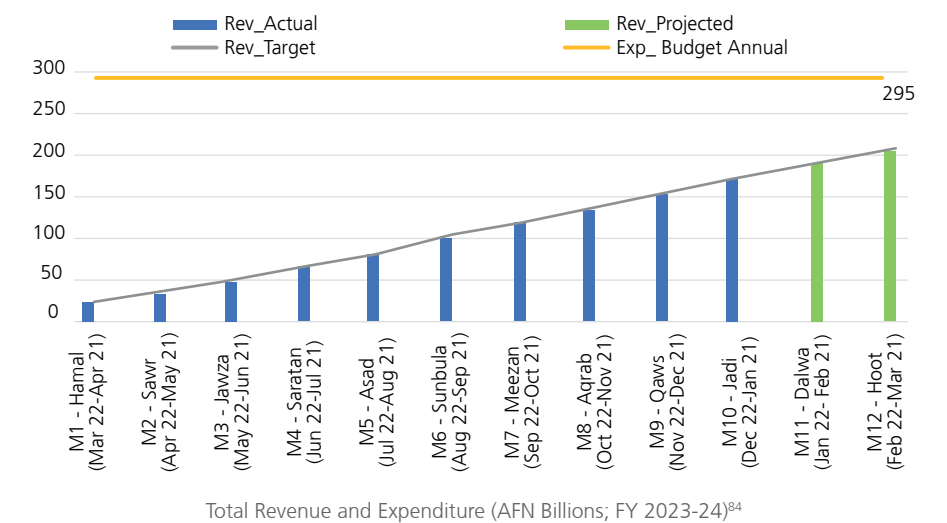
In January 2024, out of 180 surveyed countries, Transparency International (TI) ranked Afghanistan in 162nd place in its 2023 Corruption Perception Index (CPI). Of the total 100 points, Afghanistan could only score 20 points. As compared to 2022, Afghanistan dropped 12 points from 150th position in the 2022 Corruption Index (CPI).⁷⁹ Responding to the Index, the Afghanistan Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) spokesperson, Zabiullah Mujahid, said that the country's ranking shows "that very serious steps have been taken against corruption," however, if TI had had its investigation in Afghanistan, Afghanistan could have been in the first place in non-corruption.⁸⁰

Revenue and Expenditures:

According to the World Bank, almost half of the Afghan population - 48 percent - lives below the poverty line. This is mainly due to the factor that labor supply in the country has outpaced the available demand, thus increasing the unemployment rates by two times and increasing 25 percent of underemployment rates.⁸¹

The Bank noted that every one out of three males in Afghanistan is unemployed. Furthermore, in 2024, the economic situation in Afghanistan does not seem to be stabilizing as the “fragile economic conditions” are expected to continue, resulting in acute food insecurity which can affect 15.8 million people in the country.⁸²

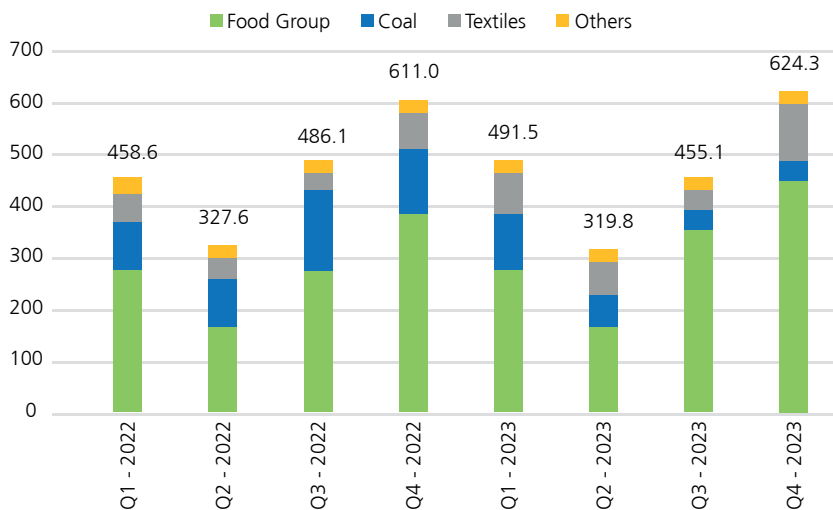
Even though the Taliban’s revenue collection increased by 3.1percent for the fiscal year 2023-24 as compared to the previous fiscal year, the overall Afghan revenue could not reach its target of 8 billion Afghanis mainly due to underperforming inland and border revenue departments.⁸³



Trade:

Given the trade outlook of the country, the World Bank reported that Afghanistan’s total exports in 2023 reached US\$1.9 billion - an increase of 0.4 percent as compared to 2022. During 2023, the food export witnessed an increase by 13 percent, reaching US\$1.3 billion as compared to US\$1.1 billion in 2022. Moreover, the country’s textile export saw a significant growth of

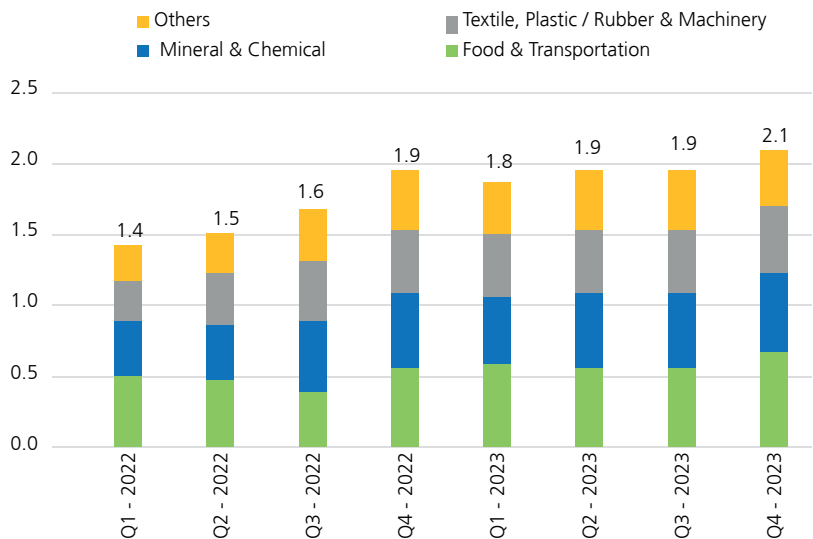
46 percent, reaching US\$281 million as compared to US\$192 million in 2022. However, Afghanistan’s coal export saw a reduction of 46 percent in 2023, reaching US\$257 million as compared to US\$476 million in 2022. Pakistan and India remained the two largest importers from Afghanistan, accounting for 54 and 31 percent respectively.⁸⁵



Afghanistan's exports (US\$ million): 2022 - 2023⁸⁶

Similarly, in 2023, the country witnessed an increase of 23 percent in its total imports, surging to US\$7.8 billion as compared to US\$6.3 billion in 2022. In 2023, Afghanistan's food imports increased by 9 percent, accounting for 22 percent of the total imports; and minerals' imports surged by 15 percent, from US\$1.3 billion in 2022 to US\$1.6 billion in 2023. Moreover, textile imports increased from US\$0.65 billion in 2022 to US\$0.72 billion in 2023 - increasing

by 11 percent. For Afghanistan, Iran remained one of the leading exporters with a total contribution of 23 percent. Similarly, Pakistan, China and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) also remained the leading export countries for Afghanistan with 19, 15 and 15 percent, respectively.⁸⁷ As a result, Afghanistan's total trade deficit increased by 34 percent, from US\$4.4 billion in 2022 to US\$5.9 billion in 2023.⁸⁸



Afghanistan's imports (US\$ billion): 2022 - 2023⁸⁹

Furthermore, the National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA) has also issued a comparative import and export data for the month of January 2024. According to the NSIA, Afghanistan's exports witnessed an increase of US\$1.2 million, from US\$148.7 million in January 2023 to US\$149.9 million in January 2024. Similarly, the country also saw a rise in its import volume reaching US\$785.4 million in January 2024 as compared to US\$686.7 in the same month of 2023 - thus an increase of US\$98.7 million. Most of these imports were from Afghanistan's neighbours, such as Pakistan, China and Iran.⁹⁰

Pakistan is one of Afghanistan's leading trading partners. However, on 13th January 2024, the Pakistan-

Afghanistan trade via Torkham was temporarily halted for 10 days due to the imposition of visa and passport restrictions by Pakistan's customs authorities. This was followed by a reciprocal action by the Taliban, who did not allow Pakistani trucks to enter Afghanistan, either. The closure of the border crossing caused a daily economic loss of nearly US\$100,000 to people on both sides of the border. However, on 23rd January 2024, the crossing was reopened, and customs authorities allowed "commercial trade" till 31st March 2024, after which provision of visa and passport by a trucker would be mandatory.⁹¹ Earlier, on 5th January 2024, Pakistan-Afghanistan customs authorities reached an agreement to expedite nearly 900 trucks on both sides on a daily basis. The agreement

came in response to problems faced by the transporters on both sides who complained about slow processing at the border which causes delay in consignment deliveries.⁹² Apart from facing periodic hurdles against the smooth flow of trade, the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) reported a 3.63 percent rise in Pakistan's export to Afghanistan in the first six months of the fiscal year 2023-2024. Despite the rise, on a year-to-year basis, Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan decreased by 26.83 percent, from US\$38.297 million in December 2022 to US\$28.019 million in December 2023.⁹³

Similarly, according to the Afghan Ministry of Industry and Commerce, Afghanistan's bilateral trade with Iran reached nearly US\$1.8 billion in the 11 months of the current solar year, i.e. by February 2024, in which nearly US\$30 million were Afghan exports to Iran, comprising of cotton, almonds, sesame and watermelon seeds.⁹⁴

Other than this, on February 25, 2024, the first commercial plane landed in Mazar-e-Sharif from the UAE since the Taliban came into power, thereby renewing the air corridor for commercial activities. The plane was carrying 16 tons of commercial goods (electric appliances) belonging to local Afghan businessmen. According to Abdullah Mutmaeen, Director of Mazar-e-Sharif International Airport Customs, the Islamic Emirate is working on providing facilities for

local businesspeople through the facilitation of air cargo.⁹⁵

Foreign Relations

The Afghan Taliban lack international recognition, yet they continue to perceive themselves as equal and active participants in the international community. They handle foreign affairs in a manner similar to an officially recognized government. Since taking control, the Taliban have been interacting with neighboring countries and the wider global community through diverse channels. These engagements include dealings with representatives of diplomatic missions in Afghanistan, hosting foreign delegations, traveling internationally, and participating in a variety of regional and global interactions. In this regard, while speaking at the Sheikh Zayed University of Khost, Mawlawi Kabir, the Afghan Deputy Prime Minister for Political Affairs, said that Taliban have good relations with all the countries, as currently they have 17 active political missions across the world.⁹⁶ In this aspect, a significant diplomatic development was seen on January 30, 2024, when the People's Republic of China became the first nation to formally acknowledge Taliban's ambassador in the Afghan Embassy in Beijing.⁹⁷ The de facto Taliban government announced that the credentials of Maulvi Asadullah, also known as Bilal Karimi, were accepted

by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People.⁹⁸ The Taliban spokesperson, Zabiullah Mujahid, said, "China has understood what the rest of the world has not," and the other countries should follow suit.⁹⁹ Similarly, Uzbekistan became the second country to welcome the Taliban-appointed ambassador, Maghfoor Ullah Shahab, on February 2, 2024.¹⁰⁰ However, addressing a weekly press brief, the US State Department deputy spokesperson, Vedant Patel, said that the US has been engaging with various Afghans, inside and outside Afghanistan, including the Afghan Taliban; however, the country does not have any "near-term plans to return any diplomatic functions to Kabul."¹⁰¹

Similarly, the Taliban have been hosting and participating in various regional conferences concerning Afghanistan. On January 29, the Afghan Taliban hosted an international conference titled "Afghanistan's Regional Cooperation Initiative", where representatives and special envoys from 11 countries participated. Chairing the conference, the Taliban foreign minister, Amir Muttaqi, highlighted the need to develop "regional cooperation" in a bid to deal with regional problems.¹⁰² For the Taliban, the conference was "one of the important conferences in Afghanistan, which will lead to regional solidarity."¹⁰³

Similarly, the United Nations (UN) convened a two-day international conference from 18 to 19 February, 2024, in a bid to discuss the future road-map for engagement with the Afghan Taliban and to discuss the independent assessment of the UN Special coordinator on Afghanistan, which was submitted in November 2023.¹⁰⁴ The conference was attended by the special envoys of 25 countries, EU, SCO and OIC in Doha, Qatar, along with various Afghan human rights activists. However, the Taliban refused to participate in the conference, as their conditions, i.e. their participation as a sole representative of Afghanistan and separate meetings with the UN etc., were not met by the UN.¹⁰⁵ The UN-sponsored conference also discussed the matter of appointing a special representative for Afghanistan, which the Afghan Taliban had termed "unnecessary",¹⁰⁶ saying that the presence of UNAMA is enough.¹⁰⁷

Other than this, the Afghan Taliban have been hosting various foreign delegations in the country. One such visit was by Maulana Fazal ur Rehman, chief of JUI-F Pakistan, on January 8, 2024, who led an 11-member delegation and held meetings with the Islamic Emirate leadership, including the Emir of the group, Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada, marking the first known meeting between any Pakistani political leader and the Taliban head. He also held meetings

with interim Afghan Prime Minister, Hasan Akhund; interim Defence Minister, Mullah Yaqoob; and interim Foreign Minister, Amir Muttaqi.¹⁰⁸ The visit took place at a time when bilateral ties have been at their lowest following a marked increase in terrorist attacks by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) reportedly using Afghanistan territory.¹⁰⁹ While the Afghan Taliban deny the presence of the TTP, according to the UNSC report of November 2023, the TTP appears to have free movement and shelter in Afghanistan and is carrying out an intensifying campaign of violence inside Pakistan.¹¹⁰

Prior to this, on January 4, 2024, Mullah Shirin, governor of Kandahar and a prominent Taliban figure, led a delegation to Pakistan to discuss bilateral matters as well as for the 6th session of the Pakistan-Afghanistan Joint Coordination Committee (JCC).¹¹¹ During the visit, he met with the interim Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Jalil Abbas Jilani. Accompanied with the officials of the Afghan Defence Ministry and the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI), the delegation discussed issues of mutual concerns.

On February 11, 2024, the adviser to the President of Russia, Ruslan Edelgeriyev, met the Interim Afghan Foreign Minister, Amir Muttaqi, to discuss the relationship between the two countries. Ruslan Edelgeriyev,

who is also the special presidential representative on climate change, ensured that his country would support the participation of a Taliban delegation in the upcoming 29th UN Climate Change Conference (COP29).¹¹²

Moreover, on February 25, 2024, an Afghan delegation, led by Amir Muttaqi, traveled to Turkmenistan.¹¹³ During the visit, both sides discussed multiple trade and political issues ranging from railways and electricity to Turkmenistan Afghanistan Pakistan India Pipeline (TAPI). Similarly, both sides reached an agreement about the use of Lapiz Lazuli Corridor for Afghan products. The corridor connects Turkmenistan with Europe.

Similarly, on 12th February 2024, in a diplomatic effort by the Taliban, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was able to secure the release of Mullah Abdul Zaher Sabir (from Logar) and Abdul Karim (from Khost), who was arrested and sent to Guantanamo Bay in 2002 and 2003 respectively. Although both were released in 2017 from Guantanamo Bay, they were sent to Oman where they spent an additional seven years under surveillance.¹¹⁴

Security Situation

The security situation in the country has improved significantly since the Taliban took control of the government. This positive change can be primarily attributed to the cessation of insurgency activities that were formerly conducted by the Taliban themselves. Nevertheless, as noted in the Thirty-third report of the *Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team* by the United Nation Security Council (UNSC), the existence of transnational terrorist organizations, mainly the regional affiliate of Daesh, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), remains a substantial challenge.¹¹⁵ This poses difficulties not only for Afghanistan but for the wider region, too.

Similarly, according to the *Eighteenth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Daesh)*, a number of Member States have shown concerns about the substantial concentration of terrorist groups in Afghanistan, which can pose serious threats to the region.¹¹⁶ The report noted that attacks by the ISKP have decreased in Afghanistan, mainly due to counter-terrorism measures taken by the Afghan Taliban. Despite such measures, the ISKP is increasing its appeal through the implementation of an “inclusive

recruitment strategy,” which aims at targeting disillusioned Taliban and other fighters, mainly Tajiks. Similarly, the ISKP is also exploiting the grievances of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) fighters, who felt pressed by the Taliban. Moreover, in Kunar and Nangarhar Provinces, various commanders of the Jamaat Ansarullah have joined ISKP.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, the report noted that the leader of the ISKP, Sanaullah Ghafari (alias Shahab al-Muhajir), who was presumed dead, is alive and reportedly located in Kunar.¹¹⁸ Other than this, several states have also shown concerns regarding the “continued proliferation of weapons from stockpiles left in Afghanistan,” and ISKP’s acquiring of weapons from TTP.¹¹⁹ However, the Taliban have rejected the claims of the report. The spokesman of the DFA, Zabiullah Mujahid, said that the threat of ISKP has been suppressed in the country, as it no longer harms other countries from Afghan soil. He further stated that several NGOs are busy with “the magnification of Daesh” (ISKP).¹²⁰

Additionally, *The Diplomat* reported that Iran may seek joint cross-border operations with the Taliban against the ISKP threat.¹²¹ However, the Taliban’s spokesperson, Zabiullah Mujahid, stated that the group does not seek any joint cooperation to fight Daesh, as the terrorist group has been suppressed with only 70 to 80 members left in Afghanistan.¹²²

Earlier, speaking at the UN Security Council meeting on terrorism, the UN counter-terrorism chief, Vladimir Voronkov, said the Taliban's efforts vis-a-vis countering Daesh's activities inside Afghanistan have impacted the latter's ability. However, ISKP still holds the intention of attacking outside the country, as the risk of its resurgence "remains".¹²³

Furthermore, a report by the *UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team* suggests that the Al-Qaida and Taliban have a close relationship, with the former maintaining a "holding pattern in Afghanistan".¹²⁴ Even though the Al-Qaida leadership reportedly enjoys the patronage of the Afghan Taliban, the report suggests tensions between the two, mainly due to the latter's constraint over the activities of Al-Qaida fighters. Moreover, up to eight new training camps - which might be temporary - and five madrasas have been newly established across Afghanistan, with a new weapons' stockpile base in the Panjshir Valley. According to the UN, Hakim al-Masri, who is based in Kunar Province has been overseeing training camps conducting suicide bomber training for TTP fighters. Moreover, Al-Qaida also has established "safe houses" in Herat, Farah, Helmand and Kabul, in a bid to facilitate its movement between Iran and Afghanistan.¹²⁵

Besides, the report also noted that

TTP has become emboldened, as it is carrying out its activities with a broader scale of autonomy. In a bid to conduct cross-border attacks in Pakistan, TTP is being supplied with weapons by the "Taliban rank and file, Al-Qaida core and Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) fighters." Additionally, many Taliban fighters have joined TTP, as they perceive this as their religious obligation, thus increasing the ratio of Afghan nationals among TTP fighters. Similarly, apart from receiving aid packages for themselves and their families by the Afghan Taliban, the TTP fighters are getting training and ideological guidance from the Al-Qaida and AQIS. This is evident as Al-Qaida "gifted" its vehicles to the TTP and allocated 15 commanders to help TTP in conducting attacks inside Pakistan.¹²⁶

Above that, noting the activities of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in Afghanistan, the report stated that after relocation from Badakhshan, Baghlan Province is the new headquarter of the group. The group mainly trains young individuals and seeks help from TTP in recruiting, training and planning attacks. Moreover, ISKP is also exploiting ETIM's grievances with the Afghan Taliban to recruit its fighters.¹²⁷

Opinion:

What ails Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations?

By Ambassador (r) Ayaz Wazir

It is no secret that Pakistan and its war-torn neighbor to the West have not had the best of relations for the last 78 years. It seems to be in a constant nosedive despite repeated attempts at reconciliation. The foundation for this contentious relationship can be traced back to two important incidents, one of which occurred on September 30th, 1947 when Afghanistan, due to its reservations on Durand Line, voted against Pakistan's admission to the UN world body. Though it lasted just for 20 days and was reversed on October 20 but this fact is not mentioned in any public talks in Pakistan, and reference is always made to the negative vote only.

The second incident was Pakistan's misadventure in Mughalgai two years later, which added fuel to the fire. On 12 June 1949, a Pakistani warplane bombed the village situated across the border inside Afghanistan. The Pakistani side claimed it was an inadvertent act, whereas according to the Afghans, it was a deliberate one. Pakistan had offered compensation,

but Afghans considered it a serious blight, warranting serious attention, thus convening the Loya Jirga, which decided that since Pakistan violated the sanctity of the border, Afghanistan would no longer adhere to the 1893 Durand Line Agreement or other related treaties.

Pakistan should not have crossed the border in pursuit of miscreants but should have taken preventive measures within its own territory.

However, these two incidents have set the foundation of bilateral relations between Kabul and Islamabad on the wrong footings, which unfortunately continue to this day.

The other factors that cannot be ignored whilst discussing bilateral relations between the two countries are the soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent US-led war on terror in that country in 2001. These incidents also have deeply impacted bilateral relations between the two immediate neighbours.

TTP is yet another important element adversely impacting bilateral relations. Given the nature of relations, Pakistan needs to tread carefully in matters related to Afghanistan as every action, no matter how small, has its impact on relations between Kabul and Islamabad. It's an established fact that the TTP and the Afghan Taliban are intertwined, both assisting each other against foreign interference

in Afghanistan. It seems the Afghan Taliban are not in a hurry to hinder the TTP from using Afghan soil against Pakistan, which explains their insistence on Pakistan to find a solution through dialogue with them as they belonged to or originated from Pakistan. Islamabad needs to be careful in approaching this issue as any move done in haste or ill-planned will push the TTP as well as the Afghan Taliban closer towards our adversaries than anyone's expectation. Many believe that it is already happening.

Alarm bells seem to be ringing as to how quickly the Afghan Taliban are warming up to India. One can say this was almost bound to happen at some point, keeping in view India's heavy investment in Afghanistan during the last twenty years and New Delhi's careful moves of befriending the Taliban.

Short-term gains by Pakistan, such as bombing camps in Khost and Kunar, fencing of the border without taking the locals into confidence, and expulsion of the undocumented Afghans, seems to have further alienated the Afghans pushing them more into the Indian path.

The government in Afghanistan's recent invitation of Maulana Fazal Rehman, Chief of Jamiatul Ulema Islam(JUI-F), to visit Kabul and Kandahar, according to the Afghan reports, was at his own behest. He

had meetings with important Taliban leaders, including their Amir Mullah Haibatullah, but that didn't break the deadlock in bilateral relations nor convinced the Taliban to take action against the TTP. This further strengthens the argument that proper care should be taken when entering into negotiations with the TTP. It should be done only through people well aware of the Tribal Customs and Tradition and hailing from the same region. Involvement or interference of outsiders will not help but further complicate the matter like it did in the recent past.

While looking at the international level, the world at large is also seeking ways in which to deal with the Taliban government in Afghanistan. That is evident from the two-day Conference that was held in Doha on February 18-19 by the UN Secretary General on how to engage with Taliban. The meeting was attended by all regional and national special envoys on Afghanistan.

As expected, and rightly so, the Taliban refused to attend the meeting as their demand to be recognized as the sole representative of Afghanistan was not adhered to.

They also did not agree to the proposal of UN special envoy for Afghanistan in view of the fact that the UN already had its UNAMA office in Kabul, so there was no need to post

another envoy there. The Taliban have expressed their displeasure of the role played by Pakistan in this conference, particularly with regard to the UN Secretary General's proposal of Special Envoy for Afghanistan.

This event could not bring about meaningful consensus on how the international community should engage with Taliban. Countries which were not so close to the Taliban are bridging the gap in their relations with them, whereas Pakistan is doing just the opposite. That approach should be reconsidered, and quick positive steps should be taken to restore confidence between the two.

It is now evident that there is a division between the West and regional countries on how to deal with the Taliban government in Afghanistan. While the West can lament the Taliban regime and delay or altogether deny recognition but the regional countries are directly impacted by the situation in Afghanistan and so are more than willing to engage with the Taliban.

Pakistan has to come to terms with the fact that the Taliban are a reality and has to be dealt with smartly and methodically, without haste to pursue its national interests. Although mistakes have been made in the past by both sides, it is now time for the people at the helm of affairs to realize that the problem cannot be solved

through brute force and power, rather both countries need to move forward and work together towards peaceful and amicable co-existence, which can only be achieved through strengthening of bilateral relations. The time has come to take concrete steps towards these goals, as after decades of instability and frequently changing leadership, Afghanistan is now solely under the banner of the Taliban.

The first key steps in facilitating good relations between the neighboring countries are:

1. Extend recognition to the Taliban government without further delay as other countries are warming up fast in that direction. China is a case in point, without making formal announcement of recognition its president not only received credentials of the Afghan Ambassador to China but posted its own ambassador to Afghanistan as well..
2. Afghanistan must be treated as a sovereign and independent state.
3. Hassle-free trade transactions at all places including Torkham, Chaman, Ghulam Khan and Angoor Adda are the need of the hour, including speedy visa facilitation for Afghans.

4. Afghanistan is a sovereign country and has the right to build relations with any country it sees fit, that includes India as well. Pakistan should respect this right and should not try to dictate to Afghanistan who it can and can't maintain relations with. Afghanistan-India relations should only ever be a cause for concern if it is used in a manner to cause harm to Pakistan.
5. The Durand Line agreement and other border line disputes should be kept on the backburner for now whilst improving relations in other fields.

If taken, the above steps will ensure that Pakistan is heading in the right direction.

Ayaz Wazir is a retired Ambassador

Rethinking the EU's relationship with Afghanistan

Flavius Caba Maria

One should note first that the EU represents a so-called “sui generis” structure / political system where public policies are dynamically shared between member states and EU institutions. Although it is not functioning like a federation, as the member state governments remain the sovereign signatories of the EU founding treaty, the EU relies on the voluntary compliance of the member states for the enforcement of EU law. Member states retain sovereignty in many areas of policy, the area being exclusive EU competence and the commercial policy. The EU engages within its umbrella with different regions, including Afghanistan.

The EU's relationship with Afghanistan has been guided by the EU Strategy for Afghanistan, adopted in 2017, aimed at developing a mutually beneficial relationship in several areas such as: the rule of law, health, rural development, education, science and technology, the fights against terrorism, organized crime and narcotics.

EU's engagement

A few months prior to the complete United States withdrawal from Afghanistan and Taliban return to power in August 2021, the EU has reiterated its pledge of support to Afghanistan with a long-term financial calculation, i.e., in the 2020 Afghanistan Conference in Geneva, the EU pledged to support Afghanistan in long-term and emergency assistance amounting to €1.2 billion over the period 2021-2025 in a then fundamentally different situation. Moreover, in the draft of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027, the preliminary work under the new development instrument “Global Europe” included indicative country allocation of around €1 billion to Afghanistan. However, as the incidents occurred in Afghanistan, the EU had to adjust its engagement to Afghanistan whereby Afghanistan remained as an eligible country for receiving development funds through a different channel of fund allocation. The fund allocation for Afghanistan is adapted through Special Measures instead of Multiannual indicative programmes (Council of the European Union, 2021). As the EU remains a normative power, highlighting the need for values promoted and human rights, it has stated that engagement is dependent on the respect of its values by the Taliban government. The

political developments in Afghanistan, particularly the Taliban takeover of the government in August 2021, have changed the EU's approach in the provision of development assistance to the country. Since the Taliban regime took over, all development assistance to Afghanistan was discontinued, given that development cooperation is traditionally channelled through the government. However, the EU maintains its commitment to provide humanitarian and basic needs and livelihood support adhering to humanitarian assistance, which were channelled through international organizations and NGOs. The main highlight of its approach is on humanitarian needs, rights of women, representation of minority groups, and safety of all nationals on Afghani territory.

The EU has manifested adaptation in its approach, as initially, it was in a wait-and-see approach vis-à-vis the Taliban government. As its power consolidated, the EU has adapted the manner in which it provides aid. One should note that from the early stages of the withdrawal, the Taliban again expanded its sphere of influence in Afghanistan. As a matter of fact, in a statement to the Russian Ria Novosti agency, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid stated that they have taken control of 90 percent of the borders of Afghanistan. As a result, with the withdrawal of foreign powers,

the Taliban ascended to a dominant and active position in the country's administration again.

The Taliban takeover and the US withdrawal have created challenges for European policy in Afghanistan. In the absence of US presence, the conditions for China and Russia's – as great powers-presence were created. China is among the States that have recognized Afghanistan under the Taliban rule in regards to having diplomatic missions in the country. It is also one of the countries that have accepted Taliban diplomats in their capitals, similar to Pakistan, Russia, Iran, Türkiye, Qatar, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and the United Arab Emirates.

While there has been much reflection over the US presence in Afghanistan, the EU still has to assess and re-evaluate its own policy. The main lesson to draw from the last twenty years of policy interventions in the country is that the EU adopted a quite superficial notion of democracy support and strategies that proved counterproductive. In the wake of the Taliban's return to power and the withdrawal of US and NATO troops, a new relationship between Europe and Afghanistan has begun. Although the prior Afghan government's collapse happened suddenly in August 2021, this date was simply the tipping point when the cumulative weight of

errors initiated at Bonn came fully to fruition. The resulting chaos, violence, and political transition back to Taliban rule has ended over two decades of EU democracy assistance and state-building efforts—at least for now.

One should note that Afghanistan has been the “largest beneficiary of EU development assistance” for some time. Since the 2016 Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, the EU has committed 5 billion euros to Afghanistan. The rationale for this “exceptional level of funding” was that such support would ensure “that Afghanistan [would] remain on a firm path to political and economic stability, state-building and development”. In fact, the results are yet to be yielded, and there is even less hope in sight for such policies to reap benefits.

European governments and the EU’s institutions find themselves obliged to accept that the entire edifice that was supported with their aid for two decades collapsed in 2021. Europe must learn to work within the bounds of Afghan norms, as in working locally with the current problems of Afghanistan in present times and in the future. The EU is especially interested as it wants to prevent massive displacement of Afghans that burdens its already burdened asylum system.

The European Union Special Envoy for Afghanistan declared in February 2024 that he is “slightly more optimistic” that progress could be made in discussions at an UN-convened meeting regarding Afghanistan that took place also in February. Tomas Niklasson (the Special Envoy) gave a press conference at the end of a four-day trip to the Afghan capital Kabul, during which he met with senior Taliban officials ahead of a gathering of special envoys for Afghanistan hosted by the United Nations in Qatar starting February 18th.

A similar meeting was held in Doha in May 2023, but that time no Afghans took part officially. The UN has called on EU countries to resettle 42,500 Afghans by 2026. Overall, around 270,000 particularly vulnerable Afghan refugees are currently in need of resettlement from Iran and Pakistan, according to the UN’s refugee agency, UNHCR.

Since the Taliban returned to power in Kabul in August 2021, the EU and EU member states declared they remain committed to supporting Afghan refugees, and tens of thousands of others at risk of Taliban persecution who remain in Afghanistan. These activities are known to prompt other illicit endeavours, such as human trafficking, and illegal border crossings, illegal weapons transfer. All the above-mentioned connected with the possibility of mass exodus is the

most undesirable outcome for the EU, especially in a year with a lot of electoral stakes, such as year 2024.

Conclusion

European states have been facing the large inflows of asylum seekers in the most recent years as a main challenge resulting from the sensitive situation in Afghanistan. The annual number of first-time asylum applications in the EU has constantly increased since 2008 and reached its peak in the years 2015 and 2016, on the background of the Syrian war. In the aftermath of Covid-19 pandemic, the asylum inflows have continued to grow because of withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the more recent situation in Ukraine in 2022, which resulted in millions more being displaced. As the facts continue, the EU's most evident interest is to work locally and invest in local strategies for Afghanistan, paying special attention to its identity rather than its normative values consecrated speech.

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AFGHANISTAN MONITOR

Volume 6



Afghanistan's dire humanitarian crisis affects more than 90 percent of its citizens, with 23.7 million requiring urgent assistance. Nearly 1.9 million Afghans have returned from neighboring nations, with 1.46 million expected back in 2024. UNICEF identifies 100,000 children in need following 2023 earthquakes. Urgent funding of \$1.4 billion is sought in 2024 to aid 19.4 million, including 10.5 million children, focusing on healthcare and water access. Among others, Denmark contributes \$6.2 million, the UK allocates \$36.5 million, and the Global Fund provides \$4.7 million for health services. UNDP grants \$66 million for development efforts amidst ongoing challenges.



Following their takeover, the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan focuses on economic development through infrastructure projects, oil extraction, and reforms in education and health sectors. Notable initiatives include road construction, and oil extraction to achieve self-sufficiency. Health efforts target polio eradication and tackling respiratory infections, especially among children. Challenges persist, including healthcare deficiencies exacerbated by natural disasters like earthquakes, leading to housing projects in affected regions. The Taliban's efforts signal a commitment to stability and development, yet challenges such as disease outbreaks and healthcare access need urgent attention for sustainable growth.



Since August 2021, the Taliban govern Afghanistan, suspending the 2004 constitution. They maintain a customary governance structure with renamed ministries, focusing on security and reforms. Limited inclusivity in the government structures persists despite including some non-Pashtun members in the cabinet. Efforts like converting a prison into an education center demonstrate a focus on rehabilitation. Despite maintaining peace, challenges remain, including disputes over women's rights and tensions with minority groups like Shia Muslims. Unity under Supreme Leader Haibatullah Akhundzada prevails. The security inside Afghanistan has improved yet neighboring countries face increasing terrorist attacks by groups which reportedly have their base in Afghanistan.