

# **SPECIAL** REPORT no. 170

## **The Long Road to Finding an End to Afghanistan's Humanitarian Crisis**

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# Abstract

**A**fghanistan is facing its most complex humanitarian crisis yet, resulting from the cascading impacts of four decades of conflicts and endemic poverty, and in more recent years, climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and chronic foreign aid dependency. Today, 97 percent of all Afghans live below poverty line, and one in every three Afghans (or 14 million) face severe hunger. This report seeks to understand the complexities of Afghanistan's humanitarian

crisis. It revisits the humanitarian situation in the country in the pre-war and in-war periods, and makes a case for the donor community and international policymakers to collaborate in finding durable solutions to the crisis and avert its dangerous consequences for stability in the region and beyond.

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# Introduction: Pre-War Afghanistan

**I**n the 1970s, although Afghanistan relied heavily on foreign aid, displacement for protection or food security was rare. Afghans rarely abandoned their home villages in the rural regions. The country was self-sufficient in its agricultural needs and exported a variety of fresh and dried horticultural products to its immediate neighbourhood and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

At the time, the Afghan government was pursuing a “win-win” foreign policy that promoted regional economic cooperation to ensure prosperity across the underdeveloped regions of South Asia and Central Asia. The Afghan people understood that in order for poverty to be reduced and for them to be protected from the impacts

of natural disasters such as floods, avalanches, droughts, and earthquakes, the country needed economic growth while fostering good relations with its neighbours.<sup>2</sup>

Humanitarian crises resulting from natural disasters were largely averted during this period. However, the former Soviet forces would soon invade Afghanistan in 1979 and occupy it for a decade. Years of war and violence weakened the resilience and coping mechanisms of the Afghan people, as most of them were forced into multiple waves of displacement in and out of Afghanistan.

# Afghanistan's Long History of Turmoil

## The Legacy of the 1990s

Today's massive humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan can be traced back to the 1990s, when the country's state institutions collapsed and the once-resilient nation suffered a decline first, when the mujahideen took over in the early 1990s and later, under the Taliban. It was in 1996 when the Taliban took over the helm, and began implementing strict Shariah rule that, for one, denied women and girls their basic human rights, including education and healthcare.

Afghanistan sank into deeper poverty, violence, and uncertainty. Save for the presence of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and some other humanitarian organisations in the country, Afghanistan seemed to have been completely isolated from the rest of the

international community.<sup>3</sup> Soon, the Taliban and the al-Qaeda would mastermind the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States, from Afghan soil.

## After 9/11

The international community re-engaged with Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11, resulting in marked improvements in the country's humanitarian situation. The Taliban regime collapsed in 2001, and the country scored progress in certain socioeconomic development indicators.<sup>4</sup> Access to education, higher education, healthcare, and electricity multiplied, while improved infrastructure in both urban and rural districts enabled the Islamic Republic to respond more effectively to crises and natural disasters.

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The Islamic Republic initiated water management projects to revitalise the agriculture and livestock sectors, providing jobs for the rural population. With the support of India, for example, the Salma Dam was constructed in the western province of Herat in 2016; it produced 42 MW of power and irrigated 75,000 hectares of farmland. The Islamic Republic also undertook regional connectivity projects<sup>5</sup> amidst terrorist attacks by the Taliban. These included the following: the TAPI (Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India) Pipeline; the CASA-1000 (Central Asia and South Asia transmission line); the TAP-500 (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan transmission line); Lapis Lazuli Transit, Trade, and Transport Route; Chabahar International Transport and

Transit Corridor; Five-Nation Railway Corridor; Afghanistan Rail Network; Trans-Hindukush Road Connectivity Project; and Digital Silk Road. The gradual implementation of these projects provided jobs especially for the youth, and gave the people some sense of hope and optimism about their future.<sup>6</sup>

These were made possible by the security, development, and humanitarian assistance provided by the international community, including Afghanistan’s immediate neighbours. The Taliban, however, carried on with its terror campaign, deliberately disrupting the country’s hard-earned gains of the previous 20 years.

# The Doha Deal

**I**n April 2021, the Joe Biden administration announced the complete withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan by 11 September 2021.<sup>7</sup> In effect, the Taliban were encouraged to renege on the commitments they made under the Doha Agreement, whose negotiation between the Taliban leaders and the Trump Administration—and eventual signing in February 2020—excluded the democratically elected Afghan government. For one, in return for the release of over 5,000 of their cadre who were in prison, the Taliban were supposed to reduce violence, engage in results-driven talks, prevent their released prisoners from returning to the battlefield, and commit to a comprehensive ceasefire that would pave the way for a sustainable political settlement.

None of these materialised. Instead, the Taliban escalated terrorist attacks in urban areas and launched offensives across Afghanistan shortly thereafter, in the months of May to August. Enjoying full-spectrum military, intelligence, and diplomatic support from Pakistan—the Taliban systematically destroyed Afghanistan’s local state institutions, commercial enterprises, critical service-delivery infrastructure, and the growing sources of licit rural livelihoods.<sup>8</sup>

In the process, they violated the provisions of Chapter VII of the United Nations (UN) Charter. The repeated calls by the international community, including from the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, to de-escalate acts of aggression and reduce violence significantly, went unheeded.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the UN Security Council failed to take punitive action under the UN Charter against the Taliban, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in the country.

By mid-2021, five million Afghans had been displaced internally and 18.4 million others needed humanitarian and other assistance.<sup>10</sup> Increased offensives by the Taliban forced another 600,000 Afghans to flee their homes and seek safety in Kabul and other urban areas. Compounding the crisis are the adverse impacts of climate change, especially seen in more frequent droughts that affect the livelihoods of one-third of Afghanistan; since early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has also further added to the challenges.

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# The Return of the Taliban

Since 15 August 2021 when Kabul fell to the Taliban, the humanitarian crisis has further deteriorated across Afghanistan. Competent government employees have abandoned their jobs, leaving Afghanistan with an irreparable brain-drain and rendering key service-delivery institutions non-functional. At the same time, most international aid organisations and diplomatic missions have closed down their development programs and evacuated their staff.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, since 7 September when the Taliban—following in-fighting—announced their foreign-installed interim government, three key developments have proven most harmful to the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. Credible and abundant evidence shows that the Taliban and Pakistan are directly responsible for these harmful developments that daily claim Afghan lives.<sup>12</sup>

First, the formation of an all-male exclusionary interim cabinet with half of its members sanctioned by the UN and one of them blacklisted by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has led to the freezing of USD 9.5 billion in the Afghan Central Bank's reserves. Moreover, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has withheld USD 370 million, which was supposed to reach Afghanistan on 23 August as part of "a global IMF response to the economic crisis." Pakistan knows too well from its own experiences with sanctions regimes that such a totalitarian setup, unmindful of all international laws, would hardly ensure continued support from the international community. The price of installing such an exclusionary entity that can be remote-controlled from Pakistan would have to be borne by the Afghan people, already reeling from the country's prolonged economic and humanitarian crises.<sup>13</sup>



Second, the enforcement by the Taliban of gender apartheid—banning women from work and girls from education—has ensured an indefinite lack of international recognition, even from Pakistan. This is because Afghanistan is the only country out of over 190 member-states of the UN where women are banned from participation in polity, society, and economy. Indeed, there is global consensus that none of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) could ever be achieved without women’s full inclusion and participation. This has effectively condemned Afghanistan to a perpetual humanitarian crisis, since women’s education and welfare have a direct impact on the overall health and economic productivity of any nation.<sup>14</sup>

Third, the Taliban are least capable of governing the country—a task far more complex and difficult than carrying out suicide terrorist attacks that target civilians and destroy soft targets as telephone towers, pylons, roads, bridges, and culverts. Over the past two months, they have learned that—unlike destruction—the acts of building, operating, and maintaining systems that could be of any help to the people, takes technical competence and resources, of which they have deprived Afghanistan. As of this writing, the Taliban are busy undoing the hard-won gains of Afghanistan, including the country’s free press,<sup>15</sup> with direct impacts on the

humanitarian situation. A country ravaged by conflict, climate change, COVID-19, and poverty can hardly afford a lack of information that can help impoverished households decide on at least the right coping mechanisms that will allow them to survive every day.

In September the UN Development Program (UNDP) reported that under the Taliban’s rule, “97% of Afghans would sink below the poverty line by next year—a staggering increase of 25%.”<sup>16</sup> The IMF also reported in October that the “Afghan economy would contract by 30%, leaving the whole nation dependent on humanitarian aid for mere survival.”<sup>17</sup>

These dismal statistics have hardly persuaded the Taliban to reverse their policies. They have disregarded international appeals, including the most recent UN Security Council statement, calling for the formation of an inclusive and representative government—one that embraces and capitalises on the hard-earned gains of the Afghan people.<sup>18</sup>

## The Role of Pakistan

Some observers of the region argue that the Taliban's indifference to the dire humanitarian situation affecting all Afghans is by strategic design.<sup>19</sup> It is to serve the military objective of Pakistan that seeks to keep Afghanistan aid-dependent and on the brink, thereby securing for itself continued influence over Afghan polity. One way to achieve this goal would therefore be to manufacture and manage a perpetual humanitarian crisis in the country, consequently exploiting the donor community for enough resources to prevent mass starvation in the country.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, Pakistan could prove these credible assumptions wrong by getting the Taliban leadership, which the country recently installed in the interim cabinet, to form an inclusive and broad-based government that is acceptable to all Afghans, including women. This would immediately help Afghanistan earn some recognition from the international community, accompanied by development aid, halt the exodus of Afghan professionals, and attract international investment in the country's untapped markets.

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# International Humanitarian Response

**A**s a short-term measure, on 13 September, UN Secretary-General Guterres convened in Geneva a high-level ministerial conference on Afghanistan’s humanitarian situation. Over one hundred countries and 30 international and regional organisations participated in the meeting. In total, the participating countries pledged some USD 1.2 billion in assistance—including USD 606 million for the next four months through the end of December.<sup>21</sup> “Urgent aid should reach one in three Afghans, who is experiencing emergency level of food insecurity, as well as more than half of Afghan children under age 5, who are at the brink of acute malnutrition,” the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) warned in October.

The problem, however, is that the challenges confronting Afghanistan are enormous, having been brought about by the convergence of an ongoing conflict, widening poverty, internal displacement, migration movements, climate change-induced floods and droughts, and the COVID-19 pandemic; the UN’s band-aid approach to averting a catastrophic humanitarian crisis would hardly work. Indeed, such a response could only end up encouraging perverse incentives and perpetuating a culture of dependency, while causing fatigue to set in on the donor community. In other words, while relief aid can indeed save lives in the immediate term, it is self-defeating in the long run, when relief assistance resources have dried up.

“Relief aid saves lives in the immediate term, but it can be self-defeating in the long run.”

# The Way Forward


**T**hroughout their terror campaign over the past 20 years, the Taliban promised suffering Afghans “permanent peace, welfare, and prosperity, if Allah wills, once in power.”<sup>22</sup> It is time they do so. If they are unable or unwilling to govern, secure, and provide for the basic needs of the Afghan people, they should be held accountable under international law so that they rethink their behaviour and make a course correction.

Their first step should be to embrace and reconcile with the much greater half of Afghanistan—including other ethnic groups, women, and youth—and to allow them adequate and fair representation in a permanent government that ought to be established soon. This can be achieved under the Doha peace process, so far incomplete, which can resume with the continued support of the international community under a robust UN mission with an operational and coercive

mandate to enforce peace, if necessary. Unless this fundamental root cause of the widening humanitarian crisis is resolved, it will not see its end, and the spillover effects would undermine not only regional stability but also international peace and security.

The silver lining could be that the international community is aware of the consequences of neglecting the externality of Afghanistan’s challenges. In the 1990s, this brought about the tragedy of 9/11. The lessons of the past 20 years must not be overlooked either. This includes the past six months of well-documented Pakistani aggression by proxy that has

brought about the current humanitarian crisis.<sup>23</sup> It is in the best long-term interest of all regional and extra-regional stakeholders to learn from the past four decades of their involvement and interventions in Afghanistan to do what is right for them and the Afghan people, consistent with the UN Charter.<sup>24</sup> More of the same would only ensure the continuity and further expansion of the threats of terrorism, extremism, and criminality that have found an enabling environment in Afghanistan again, as they did throughout the 1990s before 9/11.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, neither keeping the country on a humanitarian life-support nor abandoning it altogether is the right solution. What could constitute a durable strategy is working together to help form an inclusive government that can look after the long-term protective and human security needs of the Afghan people. It is what the Afghan people need and deserve, following four decades of deadly and destructive imposed conflicts. The international community must deliver on these basic Afghan expectations. Doing so would help ensure regional stability and maintain international peace and security. 

“The international community is aware of the consequences of neglecting the externality of Afghanistan’s challenges.”

# Endnotes

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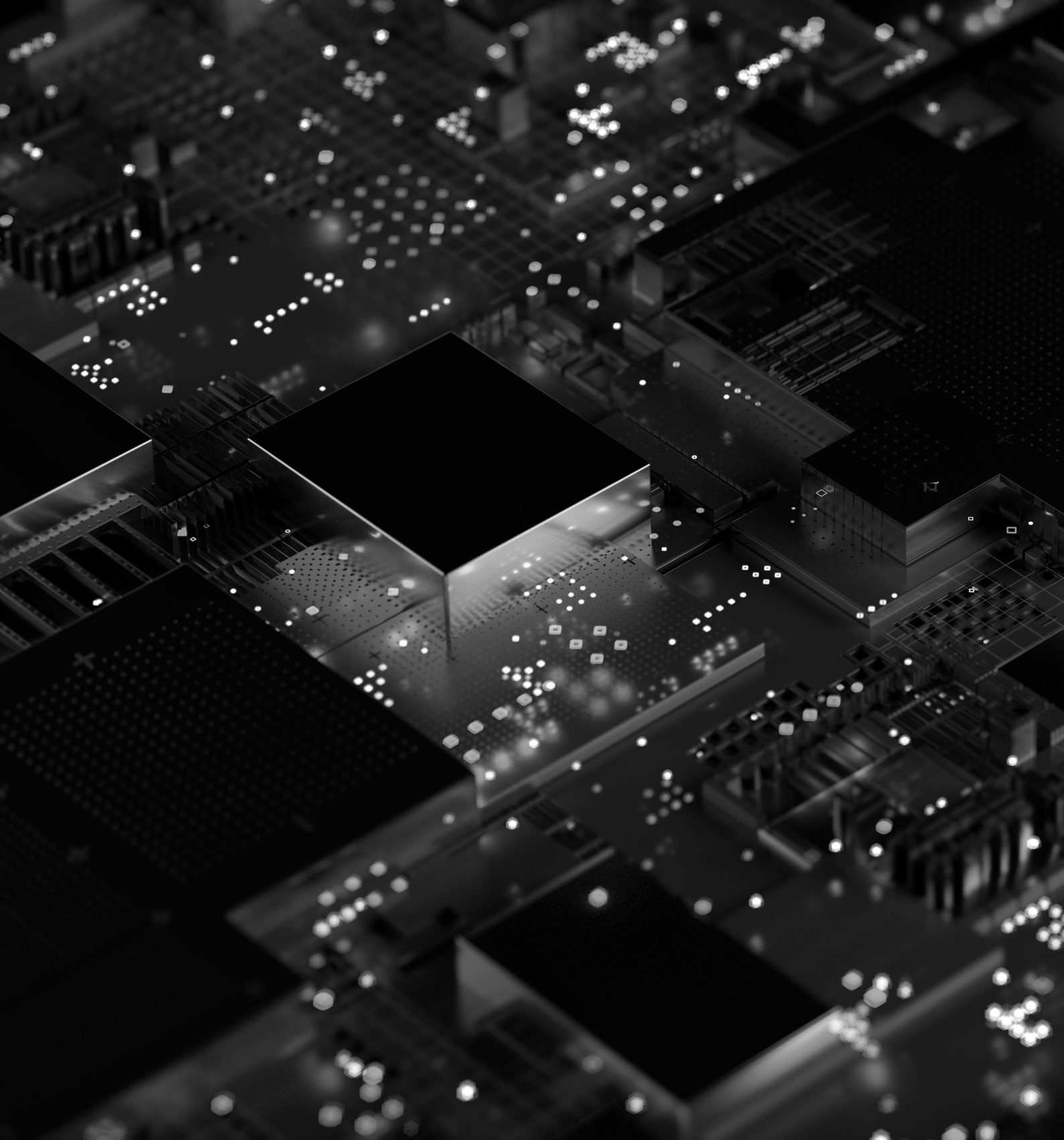
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