



Taliban Restrictions on Women's Rights Deepen Afghanistan's Crisis

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Headquarters

International Crisis Group

Avenue Louise 235 • 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 • brussels@crisisgroup.org

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Principal Findings

What's new? The Taliban have ordered the most sweeping rollbacks of women's rights since retaking power in 2021, part of a series of escalating moves to enforce the group's heterodox conservatism. Girls and women are losing access to education, employment and public spaces as well as other basic freedoms.

Why did it happen? The Taliban leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, appears to insist upon these measures out of personal conviction and to assert his authority over the movement and the country. Neither his ideological views nor his quest for power will change in the near term, despite justifiably horrified reactions from around the world.

Why does it matter? The new restrictions have dealt women's freedoms a grievous blow. They are also impeding delivery of life-saving assistance, disrupting the world's largest aid operation even as half the population suffers from acute hunger. The unrecognised regime's isolation undermines humanitarian and development efforts. It may result in drastic aid cuts.

What should be done? No good options exist for protecting women's and girls' rights and helping millions of people suffering under Taliban rule. Aid workers must pause and recalibrate when they cannot uphold humanitarian principles. Donors should fund humanitarian appeals and try to create space for development agencies and address the country's socio-economic disaster.

Executive Summary

Upon returning to power in 2021, the Taliban installed one of the world's most regressive governments, especially with regard to women's rights. The new regime in Kabul started imposing even stricter rules on women in the final weeks of 2022, with a pair of heavy-handed rulings banning them from studying in universities and working for NGOs. In response, many aid organisations paused their operations, sparking fears of greater misery as horrified Western donors threatened to cut aid and impose further isolation on Afghanistan's beleaguered economy. It is vital to de-escalate the standoff between the Taliban and the outside world for the sake of preventing a downward spiral that would exacerbate the woes of Afghans. Donors are justifiably frustrated, but they should stay focused on the aspirations and welfare of Afghans. They should fund humanitarian appeals, help aid agencies uphold their principles, take steps to address the deeper problems underpinning the country's socio-economic disaster and channel efforts at social change into long-term projects.

The December 2022 edicts on women's higher education and employment in NGOs stunned even some Taliban officials who, dumbfounded by the tough orders they were asked to enforce, asked their bosses to reconsider. Students walked out of classrooms, and protesters chanted in the streets, but Taliban forces quashed all dissent. High-level delegations from the UN and aid groups met with Taliban leaders to raise their concerns. Nonetheless, the Taliban leadership adhered to its hard line. It is rumoured to be planning even more draconian restrictions in the future.

Rolling back the rights of women and girls oppresses half the population while sabotaging the Taliban's other efforts at post-war economic recovery. The obscurantist edicts emanate from the Taliban leader, or emir, Hibatullah Akhundzada, who shrouds himself in secrecy in Kandahar. To the extent that his rulings can be understood, he appears to be pursuing an adamant vision of purity, alongside his own ambitions for control of the regime and the country. If a theocrat wants to drive his country into poverty and ignorance, there is unfortunately not much the world can do to stop him – at least, not without spurring another cycle of violence. Whispers among Western officials about sponsoring a civil war are dangerous and impractical. For the foreseeable future, Afghanistan's fate will remain in the Taliban's hands.

Shocked by the Taliban's behaviour, some foreign actors are reconsidering their role in the country. Engagement with the regime was already limited, as most Western embassies were shuttered when the Taliban took over in August 2021. Nearly all development assistance was suspended at the same time. But the latest Taliban edicts now imperil cooperation on helping Afghans meet their most basic needs. Some aid agencies suspended operations while negotiating with the Taliban to get limited authorisations for their female workers, obtaining permission for them to resume work in health, nutrition, education and other programs. But a large number of life-saving activities remain officially illegal. That not only poses obvious challenges to principles of humanitarianism, but also raises practical hurdles for operations that require female staff to reach women and girls, especially in conservative rural areas.

While international disgust with the Taliban's policies is more than understandable, backlash from Western capitals against them could be equally damaging to Afghans

– particularly women, who are disproportionately affected by the crisis. Two thirds of the population, or 28 million people, will need humanitarian assistance in 2023. Kneejerk reactions, such as cutting aid budgets, extending sanctions and inflicting other punishments, would have devastating effects on regular Afghans. Donors could better assist by:

- ❑ *Funding humanitarian appeals.* At \$4.6 billion, the 2023 UN humanitarian appeal for Afghanistan is the largest request in history, anywhere in the world. Donors should respond to the vast scale of human needs.
- ❑ *Supporting principled aid delivery.* Donors should give aid agencies they fund flexibility and support for the hard choices their staff in the field must take when confronted with Taliban meddling – and pause assistance, when necessary.
- ❑ *Focusing on long-term social change.* The Taliban's subjugation of women should not provoke international reprisals that exacerbate their suffering; instead, donors should adopt strategies aimed at fostering a more inclusive and open society over the long term.
- ❑ *Addressing the causes of the disaster.* The Taliban's abysmal reputation will constrain options, but if they wish to see Afghanistan stabilise, donors should continue to work on restoration of central banking, electrical grids, irrigation systems and other essential public goods.

Right now, Western policy is drifting in the opposite direction. Distracted by other crises and wary of facing accusations of propping up the Taliban, donors seem unlikely to answer the UN appeal generously and have even less appetite to provide development aid. The blame for that reality falls squarely on the Taliban's shoulders. Still, Western governments share some responsibility for the crisis: the country's infrastructure remains broken by decades of war in which they participated; farmers' crops are failing in part because of climate change disproportionately generated by the West; and some of the Afghan economy's dysfunction stems from Western isolation and seizure of Afghan state assets deposited abroad. Leaving aside the question of who created the crisis, women, minorities and the poor are suffering its worst consequences. Pulling out of Afghanistan in the name of women's rights when such a move will make their situation worse is a contradiction in terms. The most principled response to the Taliban's terrible behaviour would be finding ways to mitigate the harms inflicted on those vulnerable groups.

Kabul/Brussels, 23 February 2023

Taliban Restrictions on Women's Rights Deepen Afghanistan's Crisis

I. Introduction

Women's freedoms have been a matter of deadly contestation in Afghanistan for more than half a century, but never before have more lives depended on the outcome of this struggle. Women's rights recently emerged as the centrepiece of debates among the Taliban over the future of their new regime. More importantly, they have become the main topic of tense negotiations between the Taliban and outside powers over humanitarian and development assistance required to rescue almost the entire population from poverty and millions of Afghans from starvation.¹

It is not the first time that arguments about women, mostly among powerful men, have dominated Afghanistan's domestic politics and international policy toward the country. The monarchy's decline in the 1970s gave rise to factionalism that pitted Islamists against groups with more progressive views on women's role in society. Their disagreements fuelled the civil war after the Soviet invasion in 1979, which Moscow justified in part as an effort to improve women's lives. Sexual violence was widespread in the chaos that followed the Soviets' retreat in 1989; when the Taliban first captured Kabul in 1996, one of their stated reasons for imposing brutal order was to prevent rapes at checkpoints.² The first Taliban regime became globally infamous for backward gender policies, however, such as banning women from leaving their homes without a male chaperone and imposing dress codes that were alien to many Afghans.³

Western countries focused on the plight of Afghan women from 2001, when politicians cited this issue to rally support for military intervention in Afghanistan.⁴ Over the next two decades, donors spent hundreds of millions of dollars on projects aimed at fostering social equality for women.⁵ Results were mixed, but overall, women and girls benefited from improvements in education, health and basic freedoms. These reforms partly motivated the Taliban insurgency, as the militants were inspired to fight what they viewed as Western "social engineering".⁶

¹ See Crisis Group Asia Report N°317, *Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan's Humanitarian Catastrophe*, 6 December 2021. See also Crisis Group Briefing Note, "Afghanistan's Growing Humanitarian Crisis", 2 September 2021.

² Aisha Ahmad, "Afghan Women: The State of Legal Rights and Security", *Policy Perspectives*, January 2006, p. 32.

³ Nancy Hatch-Dupree, "Afghan Women under the Taliban", in William Maley (ed.), *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban* (New York, 1998).

⁴ See, for example, Laura Bush, *Spoken from the Heart* (New York, 2010), p. 146.

⁵ Over twenty years of war in Afghanistan starting in 2001, the U.S. spent an estimated \$787.4 million on programs to support Afghan women and girls, the largest such effort in history. "Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan", U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, February 2021.

⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban members, 2019-2022.

After the Taliban swept back to power in August 2021, their rallying cry as insurgents turned into a policy blueprint for their new government, leading to the reversal of many of the more progressive gender policies of the post-2001 era. This report focuses on the two latest examples of those efforts: tighter limits on women's and girls' access to education, and a ban on Afghan women working at NGOs. Both edicts triggered soul searching among donors about their Afghanistan policy, but the latter was especially damaging given its effects on aid delivery. The report is based on dozens of interviews with Afghan and international women activists, current and former Afghan officials, teachers, students, aid workers, human rights defenders, development officials, diplomats, business leaders and other interlocutors interviewed in Kabul and contacted remotely. Other conversations were held in Kabul, Dubai, Doha, Dushanbe, Istanbul, Ankara, Oslo, Geneva, Toronto, Washington, New York and London, as well as several Afghan provinces, in 2022 and early 2023.

II. Restricting Education for Women and Girls

A. *Early Hopes*

Girls and women started losing freedoms from the first days of the Taliban takeover in August 2021. At least partly in response, Western countries isolated the new regime, cutting development aid, freezing assets and maintaining sanctions. These measures contributed to a 20 per cent contraction in Afghanistan's economy in a matter of months, which in turn led to unprecedented hunger throughout the country and a plunge into poverty for millions.⁷ Fearing a famine and regional instability, donors tried a less punitive policy in 2022. The U.S. and its allies granted exemptions to sanctions and pledged so much humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan that the aid operation's size was surpassed only by the huge response in Ukraine.⁸

The avalanche of aid likely saved millions of lives, as levels of food insecurity settled short of famine levels, if not by much. Western officials also hoped that pragmatic engagement would soften the Taliban's harsh policies – especially toward girls and women – and allow cooperation with the group beyond humanitarian operations, particularly on restoring the country's essential services and stabilising the national economy. One government service that donors especially hoped to bring back was public secondary schooling for girls, which the Taliban had suspended for supposedly "technical" reasons.⁹ In January 2022, Taliban diplomats flew to Oslo, Norway, for their first meetings in Europe since seizing power, and assured donors of their willingness to reopen education to female students of all ages. At the same meeting, for the first time, U.S. and European envoys promised support to revive the war-ravaged Afghan economy, including the prospect of allowing the central bank in Kabul to recover billions of dollars held overseas.¹⁰

B. *Disappointment and Uncertainty*

The Taliban quickly went back on their promises. The emir had been such a subdued presence in the regime's early months that some analysts believed he was dead, but the Taliban's internal debate over female education – and thus, the regime's openness to the world – proved that he remained the movement's most powerful voice. The emir summoned the cabinet to Kandahar in March 2022 and cancelled plans to restart secondary schooling for girls, overruling his ministers.¹¹ Western officials felt betrayed

⁷ "Afghanistan Development Update", World Bank Group, October 2022. Estimates of economic shrinkage in 2021-2022 ranged from 15 to 30 per cent of GDP. Till Sängler, Ethan Kapstein and Ronnie Sircar, "Estimating the Collapse of Afghanistan's Economy Using Nightlights Data", Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, 11 December 2022.

⁸ Graeme Smith and Delaney Simon, "Let Afghanistan Rebuild", *Foreign Affairs*, 13 December 2022.

⁹ Policymakers' focus on getting teenage girls back into classrooms was notable in several forums, including U.S. Congressional hearings. See, for example, "Afghanistan: The Humanitarian Crisis and U.S. Response", U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Near East Asia, South Asia, Central Asia and Counterterrorism, 9 February 2022.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban and Western officials, Oslo, January 2022. See also "U.S.-Europe Joint Statement on Afghanistan", U.S. Department of State, 27 January 2022.

¹¹ Ashley Jackson, "The ban on older girls' education: Taleban conservatives ascendant and a leadership in disarray", Afghanistan Analysts Network, 29 March 2022.

by the decision, but remained hopeful that the Taliban might reverse it.¹² This hope was sustained, at least initially, by the large number of exceptions to the ban: some provincial authorities ignored it, and the rules were often overlooked for private tutoring. Surveys found that the share of girls in school between the ages of thirteen and eighteen dropped from 23 per cent before Taliban rule to 13 per cent afterward – but did not fall to zero as the ban implied. The Taliban also allowed thousands of girls to sit for university entrance exams in the autumn of 2022, as universities had continued teaching women.¹³

The emir, however, seemed to think the rules were not strict enough. He assembled Taliban leaders again in November 2022 and insisted on hardline policies that were executed shortly thereafter: the Taliban banned women from parks, gyms and bath houses, and reintroduced the public punishments of criminals, including floggings and executions, that had been hallmarks of their previous regime's brutality. Students speculated heatedly about whether universities would be the next target of the emir's crackdown.¹⁴

C. *Bad News at Gunpoint*

The answer was yes, and the Taliban braced for unrest when they finally delivered the news. On 20 December 2022, the Ministry of Higher Education issued a written order to public and private universities, suspending female education until further notice.¹⁵ An unusual concentration of armed Taliban stood at checkpoints set up around universities, confronting female students and teachers at campus gates. Male students were ushered inside while women were told, at gunpoint, that they could no longer attend. Male and female students protested in several cities, but the Taliban dispersed them with water cannons, beatings and arrests.¹⁶

Women students were devastated. A student at Kabul University said she was scheduled to graduate on the day of the ban, but instead of receiving her degree and ceremonial robes, she was turned away. She tried visiting a private tutoring centre where she was taking English courses – but there, too, she found Taliban blocking the doors. “I had many hopes and aspirations to be a productive member for my family and society”, she said. “In one day, all these hopes were dashed”.¹⁷

Another student, studying for a master's degree in literature, said she was preparing for her final examination when her phone started buzzing with messages. Her lecturer told a group of students that he hoped to slip them into an examination room early in the morning before the ban was enforced. She stayed up all night, showing up to take the exam at the appointed hour, but the instructor sent her home, along with her fellow students, as Taliban fighters in pickup trucks arrived at the university.

¹² Crisis Group interviews, senior Western officials, March-December 2022.

¹³ “Afghan girls sit exams despite not attending schools for a year”, Al Jazeera, 7 December 2022. The Taliban have since cancelled exams for girls and women planned in the spring.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Kabul, November and December 2022.

¹⁵ Christina Goldbaum and Najim Rahim, “Taliban bar women from college classes, in a stark reversal of rights”, *The New York Times*, 20 December 2022.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, students and teachers, Kabul, December 2022.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Kabul, December 2022.

“We could see the tears in our teacher’s eyes,” she said.¹⁸ A university instructor, also turned away from her classroom, said the ban left her with bleak prospects: “Without this income, how will my family feed itself?”¹⁹

The Taliban did not immediately clarify the full scope of their restrictions on higher education for women, leaving Afghans to wonder whether the rules would affect every province, whether the ban was permanent, and whether it also included private schools and religious seminaries. The most detailed explanation came two days later from the minister for higher education, Neda Mohammad Nadeem, who claimed that the problem was propriety: female students live by themselves in hostels far from their homes, in contravention of what he described as Islamic injunctions, he claimed, adding that female students failed to wear “proper” clothing and maintain gender segregation on campus. He also complained that women enrolled in courses, such as engineering and agriculture, that did not suit them.²⁰

The minister’s explanations were puzzling – millions of Afghan women work on farms, so why not study agriculture? – but these and other comments from the Taliban suggested that the impediments to education for women and girls were technical matters that could, in theory, be resolved. All indications pointed to the Taliban moving in the opposite direction, however, as rumours grew louder of stricter enforcement of the prohibition on secondary education and possibly even a ban on girls in primary classes. Some primary schools in Kabul informed female staff in December 2022 that they should no longer report to work, indicating that classes for girls might not resume in March after the winter break.²¹ In southern provinces, however, where primary schools have different holidays, girls continued attending primary schools as usual.²² The Ministry of Education issued a statement in January 2023 saying all schooling in grades one to six would be permitted; later in the month, another statement said women are barred from private universities.²³ Still, enforcement of the new rules will remain untested until spring, when the school year resumes.

D. *International Condemnation and Threats*

Negative reactions from around the world were loud and unanimous. Some of the most notable criticism came from governments of majority-Muslim countries that enjoy working relationships with the Taliban and do not usually speak out against their policies, including Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and (cautiously) Pakistan. Several groups of Islamic scholars also condemned the Taliban decisions.²⁴ The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation had already sent a delegation

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Kabul, December 2022.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Kabul, December 2022.

²⁰ Interview with Neda Mohammad Nadeem, RTA Pashto, 22 December 2022.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, school staff, Kabul, December 2022.

²² Crisis Group interviews, Kandahar and Helmand provinces, December 2022.

²³ Written statement by Habibullah Agha, acting minister of education, 8 January 2023; Riazat Butt, “Taliban warn women can’t take entry exams at universities”, Associated Press, 28 January 2023.

²⁴ See “Ministry of Foreign Affairs expresses Saudi Arabia’s astonishment and regret at decision of Afghan caretaker government to deny Afghan girls right to university education”, Saudi Press Agency, 21 December 2022; Diyar Gündoğan, “Taliban ban on higher education for young women ‘not humanistic’: Türkiye”, Anadolu Agency, 22 December 2022; “Qatar Expresses Deep Concern, Disappointment over Decision to Suspend Study of Girls, Women in Afghanistan’s Universities”, Qatar Ministry

to dispute the Taliban's education bans in June 2022 and indicated that further visits would follow from senior figures in the Muslim world to advocate for women's rights.²⁵

Western officials who had been forewarned of the Taliban announcement on universities had already spent several weeks discussing options for deepening sanctions, cutting aid or levying other forms of punishment in response. Germany chaired a meeting of G7 foreign ministers that described the Taliban's gender persecution as a possible crime against humanity.²⁶ After the ban was announced, the G7 donors, which provided most of the \$3 billion in humanitarian funding for Afghanistan in 2022, threatened unspecified future "consequences".²⁷ U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said his government was discussing with others about how to respond. "There are going to be costs if this is not reversed", he said.²⁸

of Foreign Affairs, 21 December 2022; "United Arab Emirates Condemns the Taliban's Decision to Ban Girls from Higher Education", Permanent Mission of the UAE to the UN, 21 December 2022; "Pakistan urges Afghan authorities to revisit ban on university girls", Associated Press of Pakistan, 21 December 2022; and "Taliban's ban on women's university studies contradicts with sharia: Egypt's Al-Azhar imam", *Egypt Today*, 23 December 2022.

²⁵ "Final Communiqué of the Extraordinary Meeting of the OIC Executive Committee on 'The Recent Developments and the Humanitarian Situation in Afghanistan'", Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, 11 January 2023. The Taliban responded defiantly to most of the international pressure, but they struck a more conciliatory tone with this organisation, saying its concern "regarding women's education is understandable, but the Islamic Emirate [Taliban regime] is taking steps to resolve this issue." Statement by Zabihullah Mujahid, Taliban spokesperson, 12 January 2023.

²⁶ Afghanistan is a state party to the Rome Statute that established the International Criminal Court. Legal experts in The Hague and elsewhere are investigating whether the Court should consider a case against the Taliban for the crime of persecution. Crisis Group interviews, January 2023.

²⁷ "Statement by Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock in her capacity as Chair of today's virtual G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting", press release, Federal Foreign Office of Germany, 22 December 2022.

²⁸ Shannon Crawford, "US threatens Taliban with 'costs' after ban on Afghan women and girls from school", ABC News, 23 December 2022.

III. Banning Women at NGOs

A. *The Taliban Double Down*

Far from reversing direction, the Taliban doubled down with another restriction on women's rights that could be even more immediately damaging to their lives and livelihoods. Protests of the education ban were still reverberating on 24 December when the Ministry of Economy circulated a new letter banning Afghan women from working for national and international NGOs.²⁹ Authorities clarified that the ban would not apply to women working in hospitals, clinics or other parts of the health sector, but for all other activities, the rules prevented tens of thousands of NGO staff from doing their jobs as usual. Major aid organisations paused operations in a matter of hours, as a show of solidarity with female colleagues and because some of their activities could not continue without female staff. Women account for about 30 per cent of Afghan NGO workers in the country.³⁰

Aid workers held emergency meetings in Kabul on 25 December, including an umbrella group of NGOs that concluded programs must be "suspended, stopped or reduced".³¹ The world's leading humanitarian officials debated the issue on 27 December at a rare Inter-Agency Standing Committee meeting. Some committee members pushed for a full stop in assistance until the Taliban reversed the ban, while others called for aid workers to stay on the job, despite the discriminatory rules, because interrupting life-saving aid would result in vast suffering, including for women, who are disproportionately affected by the crisis.

Aid agencies faced stark dilemmas. Staff with experience in conservative villages understood that social norms would make it hard, sometimes impossible, to help women without female staff. After decades of war, Afghanistan has millions of widows, many of whom depend on aid for their and their children's survival; nearly a quarter of Afghan households are headed by women.³² Some NGOs could ask female staff to work remotely, but the remaining men on staff could not maintain the same degree of face-to-face outreach. In other words, aid workers knew that the Taliban's ban would hurt Afghan women and children, but they also worried that holding back assistance in protest could be immoral, deadly and futile – as it could fail to convince the stubborn regime to revise its policy.³³

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee announced on 28 December that "many" humanitarian activities would remain paused as senior UN officials made plans to

²⁹ The Taliban kept most of the previous government's bureaucracy in place, regulating NGOs through the Ministry of Economy. Crisis Group interviews, Ministry of Economy officials, Kabul, March-October 2022.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, UN and NGO staff, January 2023.

³¹ "Statement by ACBAR on Suspension of Women Staff Working in NGOs", Agency Coordinating Body for Afghanistan Relief and Development, Kabul, 26 December 2022.

³² A survey of 17,000 households found that 23 per cent of them were headed by women, including 10 per cent by women who described themselves as widows. (Some experts caution that the results may be distorted by respondents providing answers that might bring additional aid.) "Whole of Afghanistan Assessment 2022", Reach Afghanistan, September 2022.

³³ Crisis Group interviews, UN and NGO staff, Kabul and Geneva, January 2023.

visit Afghanistan and seek compromises with the Taliban.³⁴ It was not clear which parts of the sprawling aid operation would be halted, in part because UN agencies disagreed about the best ways to respond and in part because some UN officials delegated tough decisions about paring operations back to their subordinates.³⁵ Some types of assistance, particularly food deliveries, continued, while others were curtailed, such as programs designed to provide shelter, sanitation, education, agriculture and protection of basic rights. The Taliban offered assurances that the new prohibitions would not affect Afghan or foreign women working at UN agencies, but with 70 per cent of UN programs delivered via NGO implementing partners, the impact was expected to be profound.³⁶

B. *Immeasurable Harm*

At desolate offices in Kabul, with many colleagues forced to stay home, aid workers said they did not immediately know the extent of harm inflicted by the Taliban's interference with their operations. Some humanitarian officials predicted "hundreds of thousands" of deaths as vital assistance slowed.³⁷ Reductions in aid were reported for 11.6 million women and girls, although in some cases the interruptions were temporary. Among the most vulnerable were one million people requiring assistance to get through one of the harshest winters in years: warm clothing, heating supplies and blankets. Delivery of such seasonal assistance slowed in January, even as a cold snap pushed temperatures below -30 degrees Celsius in some places. Aid workers predicted more respiratory infections, hypothermia and deaths, especially among children and the elderly.³⁸

Measuring the human toll of the ban on female aid workers will be difficult in a country that has never had a census or reliable mortality data. Evidence of large-scale suffering could emerge in the coming months from telephone surveys, which already indicate that two thirds of the country's households struggle to meet basic needs.³⁹ The most authoritative analysis is expected in early 2023 from the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, a partnership of aid groups with responsibility for monitoring food security levels. Yet even the classification could become less reliable this time around, because on-the-ground assessment teams need to have male and female staff to gather the best information possible. Over time, reductions in female NGO staff will render the needs of women and girls more and more invisible.⁴⁰

³⁴ "Statement by Inter-Agency Standing Committee Principals on Afghanistan", UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 28 December 2022.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, UN and NGO staff, Kabul, January 2023.

³⁶ Many UN and NGO officials did not trust these assurances, fearing instead that the Taliban might impose additional restrictions in the coming weeks to push women out of UN jobs and international staff positions at NGOs. Crisis Group interviews, aid workers in Kabul, January 2022.

³⁷ "Children will die' – NGOs warn millions at risk after Taliban ban on women aid workers", Radio New Zealand, 30 December 2022.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, UN and NGO staff, Kabul, January 2023.

³⁹ The World Bank's Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey has conducted two rounds of telephone interviews under Taliban rule, based on old lists of numbers obtained during household surveys under the previous government. Further surveys are planned every six months.

⁴⁰ Aid workers are most concerned about hunger in Ghor and Badghis provinces, warning that the number of deaths can rise quickly in such situations. For example, most deaths in the 2011 Somalia

C. *Economic Effects*

Other indicators to watch will be the Afghan currency's value and local prices of food staples. In 2022, unprecedented shipments of food aid helped slowly reverse the price hikes that had driven many Afghans into desperation after the Taliban takeover, although basic goods in the bazaars remained more expensive than in 2021.⁴¹ Aid workers said they will try to continue food deliveries, but their success may depend in part on negotiations with the Taliban to get permission for female staff at distribution sites.⁴²

The slowdown in aid delivery is also expected to reduce the amount of cash coming in on UN airlifts. The U.S. dollars that the UN sends for aid operations are watched closely by the Taliban, who announce the arrival of each plastic-wrapped brick on social media.⁴³ This cash flow amounted to about \$2 billion in 2022.⁴⁴ Publicising the airlifts props up the national currency, the afghani, because much of the cash gets traded for local banknotes. The injections also provide liquidity that businesses need for importing food, fuel and medicine. The Taliban lack alternative hard currency sources, because most of Afghanistan's central bank assets are frozen overseas.⁴⁵ Aid agencies' orders for cash were backlogged in January, as a shipment was cancelled due to security concerns, but the flights resumed, with hundreds of millions of dollars expected in the weeks to follow.⁴⁶ The cash in the pipeline should cushion the blow of aid reductions for now. But negative effects may show up later, if the slower tempo of aid operations and smaller budgets result in fewer U.S. dollars in Kabul, weakening the afghani and triggering inflation.⁴⁷

The effects of an aid slowdown could be crippling. In one scenario, in which cash shipments are reduced 75 per cent in 2023 but Afghanistan continues to receive donations of food and other in-kind assistance, economic growth would fall to 1 or even 0 per cent annually. That would spell deepening poverty for a growing population with 500,000 new job seekers each year.⁴⁸

famine, which killed 258,000 people, happened over a few months. Crisis Group interviews, food security experts, Kabul, January 2023.

⁴¹ "Afghanistan: Countrywide Weekly Market Price Bulletin", World Food Programme, 5 January 2023.

⁴² As of mid-January, Taliban were allowing female staff to help with food distribution in at least nine of 34 provinces; in some other locations, only male staff were conducting distribution, which reduced the likelihood of reaching female-headed households. Crisis Group interviews, UN and NGO staff, Kabul, January 2023.

⁴³ See, for example, the tweet by Da Afghanistan Bank, @AFGCentralbank, 11:53pm, 14 January 2023. Although the central bank publishes pictures of the cash, the UN says none of the money is deposited in Da Afghanistan Bank nor provided to the Taliban. "Cash Shipments to the UN in Afghanistan – Info Sheet", UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 9 January 2023.

⁴⁴ "Potential Macroeconomic Impact of Reduction in Cash Shipments", World Bank Group, 13 January 2023.

⁴⁵ Graeme Smith, "Afghanistan's central bank needs its assets back", *The Economist*, 12 October 2022.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, Kabul, January 2023.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Afghan businessmen and UN staff, January 2023. Informal currency market rates are posted online by Sarafi, a currency exchange.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, development official, 10 February 2023.

D. *Looming Aid Cuts*

The Taliban's obstructive policies will have grave consequences for aid agencies and the people they serve, but the far bigger worry is whether Western donors will keep footing the bill. Afghanistan consumed a large part of international aid budgets over the last two decades, and in the second half of 2022, Western governments warned agencies of a growing sense of donor fatigue. The Taliban edicts in December made funding cuts more likely, as many Western politicians fear voters will not accept the idea of their taxes helping a country ruled by an odious regime. Consultations in January 2023 among major donors produced initial thinking that aid should be trimmed back to send a message to the Taliban, although the governments involved did not agree on which budgets to cut.⁴⁹ A prominent academic suggested reallocating aid to places where the money could be better spent, perhaps in East Africa.⁵⁰ In any case, Western governments seemed poised to fall significantly short of the UN's appeal for \$4.6 billion in humanitarian aid, and key donor meetings about development assistance were cancelled.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, January 2023.

⁵⁰ Hugo Slim, "Humanitarians must reject the Taliban's misogyny", Oxfam (blog), 10 January 2023.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, December 2022 and January 2023.

IV. The Taliban's Hardening Regime

None of the warning signs of impending disaster seemed to concern the Taliban leadership. Dynamics within the movement during its first year and a half of government suggested scant hope for a major reversal of policy in the short term – just the opposite, in fact, as the regime grew into a stricter theocracy. Taliban leaders appeared to be locked in an internal tug of war to determine their government's direction, with the fundamental rights and freedoms of Afghan women at the centre of the tussles among several factions, notably pitting the emir and his inner circle against somewhat more pragmatic officials. The former remained focused on the Taliban movement's ideology, paying little heed to feedback from Western capitals or even the general public in Afghanistan.⁵²

A. *Women's Rights as a Battlefield*

Women's rights were contentious among the Taliban leadership from the first days after the group returned to power. Soon after selecting a cabinet in September 2021, the movement announced the reopening of schools – but not girls' secondary classes. They relented in March 2022, declaring plans to open secondary schools for both genders.⁵³ Had they kept those promises, it would have indicated a major compromise by Taliban stalwarts who remain nostalgic about their former regime in the 1990s, under which girls' schooling usually stopped at sixth grade.⁵⁴

News that the Taliban might accept a more modern style of education brought journalists from around the world, who set up cameras to record the historic moment of teenage girls flooding into classrooms that the movement had previously emptied.⁵⁵ The international spotlight appears to have caused uneasiness among Taliban hardliners, with senior movement figures expressing concern. Some of them complained privately that their Islamic Emirate looked no different from the Islamic Republic, as the Western-backed government they overthrew called itself. Protecting their ideology, partly in honour of their dead fighters, became a rallying cry for conservatives. They coalesced around the emir in Kandahar, and girls' education became the battleground for their disputes with a more flexible wing of the movement, mostly in the ministries of Kabul.⁵⁶ It is hard to know what occurs in Taliban meetings, but reports have emerged of tense exchanges among cabinet ministers and senior clerics as the question of girls' education turned into a proxy for debate over the new regime's character.⁵⁷

⁵² Section IV of this report is informed by Crisis Group's conversations with Taliban in 2022.

⁵³ "Afghanistan: Reopening Girls' Schools Needs Watching", Human Rights Watch, 22 March 2022.

⁵⁴ A.W. Najimi, "A Survey on SCA-Supported Girls' Education", Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, 29 August 1997.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, regional and international journalists, Kabul, March 2022.

⁵⁶ This description of "hardliners" versus "pragmatists" is imprecise. It does not always correlate with residence in Kabul or Kandahar. Some Taliban officials in the capital are understood to be more politically aligned with Kandahar, including leading figures at the Academy of Science, Ministry of Justice, Supreme Court, Ministry of Hajj and Endowments, General Directorate of Intelligence, and the re-established Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice of Afghanistan. Forthcoming Crisis Group publications will analyse Taliban governance.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban and Western officials, Kabul, February-April 2022.

B. *The Emir Asserts Himself*

Most accounts of the Taliban's deliberations focus on the central role of the emir and his coterie of clerics. Hibatullah Akhundzada was born in the farmland of the Panjwai Valley, south west of Kandahar city, where the Taliban movement originated. His father was a preacher and Hibatullah gained prominence as a religious adviser, rising within the Taliban as a judge who enforced internal discipline. He built a reputation not as a military commander but as an unflinching arbiter of rules who recruited his own son as a suicide bomber.⁵⁸

The Taliban are famous for obeying the emir without question, but the debates over education reportedly made him fret that the loyalty was eroding. Much of the cabinet disagreed with his approach, arguing for more leniency, but he held firm, for both ideological and political reasons. Ideologically, he appears to share the views of conservatives who want to narrow women's access to education; he reportedly discussed limits on fields of study – for example, allowing women to learn only medicine – and formed a commission to revise the secondary and tertiary curriculums to remove content deemed un-Islamic. Politically, a fight over education gave the emir a chance to appeal to rank-and-file Taliban, whom he believes agree with his ideas about women.⁵⁹ It also gave him an opportunity to define himself as more than just a figurehead. As insurgents, Taliban leaders had delegated authority to second-tier commanders. The emir's role was mostly symbolic then, and some Taliban officials hoped that after the takeover he would continue to serve as a spiritual guide while ministers ran the government's day-to-day affairs.

But, after secluding himself in Kandahar in the first months after the Taliban captured Kabul in August 2021, the emir emerged from the shadows to involve himself in the minutiae of governance. He usually avoids meeting the full cabinet, in favour of smaller gatherings with a handful of relevant ministers. One of his first major decrees focused on the status of women; conspicuously missing from the text was women's right to education.⁶⁰ Ever since, the emir has become more engrossed in the smallest aspects of running the country, issuing edicts to governors, judges and provincial authorities. In August 2022, marking his first year in power, he replaced a cabinet minister for the first time, shuffling out the minister of agriculture, irrigation and livestock. In the following months, he also replaced the ministers of education and higher education, in both cases appointing loyalists who would handle the topic of female education in a way that suited his conservative views on women's rights.⁶¹

In some ways, the emir's efforts to put the entire country under his personal rule evoke past Afghan regimes, which may bode ill for his ambitions. Most of the country's

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews and archives, 2017-2022.

⁵⁹ Polling data on this question are non-existent. The shortcomings of Western knowledge about the situation are discussed in Section V.A of this report.

⁶⁰ The decree protected limited rights for women as the Taliban define them, including rights to inheritance and consent to marriage. The Taliban and their supporters do not consider themselves misogynist, arguing that they merely safeguard a set of women's rights that is different from, for example, those championed by the UN. "Special Decree Issued by Amir al-Momenin on Women's Rights", Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 3 December 2021.

⁶¹ See "Agriculture minister's replacement", Bakhtar News Agency, 21 August 2022 (Pashto); tweet by Zabiullah Mujahid, Taliban spokesman, @Zabehulah_M33, 7:45am, 20 September 2022; and tweet by Nunn Asia, @nunnasia, 6:59am, 17 October 2022.

kings and presidents have tried to centralise power, and most have grappled with challenges to their authority from figures on the periphery. Rugged terrain and diverse peoples have often prevented leaders from imposing their will. The emir may have calculated that expelling women from universities and NGOs would be dramatic gestures that demonstrate his clout. It may have worked in the short term, but some Taliban officials grumble that he overplayed his hand. Some also gripe about the emir's new habit of micromanagement, as he sometimes gives instructions on minor matters concerning only local authorities.⁶²

C. *No Mechanism for Disagreements*

It is, moreover, not a foregone conclusion that the conservatives have won permanent victories in any of the internal battles. Some Taliban figures hope that room for compromise remains, not least because the emir's decisions undermine state-building efforts that require having an educated work force and good relations with the world. A Taliban commission reviewing girls' education, whose work was under way when the emir intervened, has almost finished its work and may offer faint hope for policy adjustments in the coming months. The Taliban also showed signs of relaxing the NGO ban in January, as some aid organisations were able to negotiate exemptions for their female staff, though these were largely limited to health, nutrition and primary education programs.⁶³

Still, the trends in the Taliban leadership are isolation and obscurantism, and with almost no mechanisms for curbing the emir's authority, there is little recourse for anyone who disagrees with his edicts.⁶⁴ Before and after taking power, Taliban officials discussed the need for a constitution that would define roles and responsibilities in their new government. But no such document has appeared, and in practice the Taliban have done little to include any Afghan voices but their own in policy deliberations.⁶⁵ Ministers and provincial governors express frustration at having to deal with the consequences of the harsh rulings coming from Kandahar. "Now that we don't accept humanitarian aid, we should blame ourselves", a Taliban official said.⁶⁶

⁶² Crisis Group interview, Taliban official, Kabul, 24 December 2022. The emir's centralisation effort contrasts with earlier promises: "We are committed to working with other parties in a consultative manner of genuine respect to agree on a new, inclusive political system in which the voice of every Afghan is reflected and where no Afghan feels excluded," wrote Sirajuddin Haqqani, now acting interior minister, in *The New York Times* on 20 February 2020.

⁶³ See, for example, "Save the Children Resumes Some Activities with Female Staff in Afghanistan", press release, Save the Children, 15 January 2023. Such exemptions remain a work in progress, as Taliban officials have sometimes been willing to give verbal assurances but failed to offer the written permissions necessary for female staff to clear bureaucratic hurdles and physical roadblocks. Crisis Group interviews, aid workers, January 2023.

⁶⁴ Disagreement is permitted in a few channels: for example, the emir reportedly depends on provincial councils of *ulema*, or clerics, to convey local sentiments to the leadership in Kandahar. Crisis Group interviews, 2022 and 2023.

⁶⁵ "Legitimacy of Afghanistan's Current System: The Need for a Constitution", Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (Kabul), 1 November 2022.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, Taliban official, 24 December 2022. Anti-Taliban factions speculate that internal frustrations with the emir could result in his death or replacement, but these rumours appear to be unfounded. Crisis Group interviews, January 2023.

V. International Options

A. Constraints on Outside Actors

Responses from the outside world to the Taliban's behaviour are constrained by several realities. Foremost among them is the fact that the Taliban won the war in 2021; since then, the new regime has cemented its authority over nearly all of Afghanistan's territory. Violence levels have plunged, and the small insurgencies that smoulder in the eastern and northern mountains are not credible threats to the regime.⁶⁷ The Taliban conceal the details of their finances, but leaked budgets suggest they collect enough revenue – mostly from customs – to sustain a rudimentary state.⁶⁸ Other signs also point to the Taliban's firm grip, such as their ability to fight corruption.⁶⁹ As a result, there are no realistic options for circumventing or replacing the Taliban de facto government.

Another constraint is the dismal track record of foreign actors trying to persuade the Taliban to reconsider their policies. Aid workers who spent years haggling with the Taliban in the 1990s remember that high-level meetings were rarely fruitful. Better strategies usually involved outwardly respecting the rulings from Kandahar while negotiating practicalities with Taliban officials, often at the provincial or local level.⁷⁰ After surviving twenty years of U.S./NATO operations that harmed thousands of civilians, the Taliban, if anything, have grown less interested in hearing foreigners tell them about morality and decency. Many Afghans, far beyond just the Taliban themselves, complain about the alleged wastefulness, corruption and hidden agendas of external actors who arrived in droves during the war.⁷¹

For international actors working in Afghanistan, another important problem that often goes overlooked is the lack of information about public opinion. Some aid organisations have rightly asserted that foreign policymakers should respond to Taliban misogyny by respecting Afghan women's wishes; however, polling data about Afghan women's preferences at this juncture are non-existent.⁷² Afghan women were not passive observers of recent wars, but no one knows how many backed the Taliban or applauded the insurgents' seizure of power in 2021. So far, there is no empirical reason

⁶⁷ The number of Afghans internally displaced by violence declined by 93 per cent in the fourteen months after the Taliban takeover compared with the fourteen months prior, according to UN estimates. "Afghanistan: Conflict-Induced Displacements," UN OCHA, 15 January 2023. For more, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°326, *Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban*, 12 August 2022.

⁶⁸ "National Budget: Fiscal Year 1401," Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, undated. Surveys of civil servants indicate they are getting paid, with female civil servants paid more regularly than males. "Afghanistan Economic Monitor," World Bank Group, 25 January 2023.

⁶⁹ David Mansfield, "Changing the Rules of the Game: How the Taliban Regulated Cross-Border Trade and Upended Afghanistan's Political Economy," XCEPT, 25 July 2022. Anti-corruption efforts were not always successful: passport offices, for example, have been plagued by allegations of graft under the new regime. Crisis Group interviews, 2021-2023.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, current and former aid workers, 2021-2023.

⁷¹ A conspiracy theory about NGOs that assist Afghan women is that the charities are secretly prostitution rings; these stories are unfounded, but they reflect widespread suspicions of NGOs among not only the Taliban but also the general public. Crisis Group interviews, 2005-2023.

⁷² The largest survey, conducted for The Asia Foundation beginning in 2004, is known to have serious flaws. Andrew Pinney, "Data Quality Analysis: TAF Survey of the Afghan People," UK Department for International Development, unpublished draft, 23 May 2010.

to think that Afghan women support cutbacks in development or humanitarian aid because of the rollbacks of their human rights. Nor is it clear how many Afghan women approve of these Taliban policies.⁷³ In short, Western policymakers should exercise restraint when presuming to take action on behalf of Afghan women.⁷⁴

Other blind spots in the picture should give pause to policymakers before they try to squeeze concessions from the Taliban using economic pressure. Western leaders may consider limiting humanitarian and development assistance as a way of reminding the Taliban about the weakness of their position. It is unclear, however, whether the Taliban understand themselves to be impoverished – and, if so, whether they would respond to financial incentives. Taliban leaders often valorise poverty, portraying their regime as a moral guardian against a corrupt West that prizes money over virtue.⁷⁵ Nor is much known about the hidden riches the group may be earning from narcotics and other forms of smuggling, so the degree of economic pain they could endure is also hard to quantify; one estimate hinted that the size of the illicit economy might equal or surpass the scale of formal commerce.⁷⁶ Moreover, the history of economic pressures on other isolated regimes suggests that, despite presiding over a fall into poverty, the regimes often survive.⁷⁷

It is also hard for Western policymakers to know exactly how much suffering the Afghan people are enduring as a result of existing measures against the Taliban and what further pressure could be applied without causing a catastrophe. The UN estimates that 28 million people, or two thirds of the population, need humanitarian assistance in 2023, up from 24 million the year before.⁷⁸ If that figure is correct, even the smallest reductions in aid would lead to many deaths. Taliban officials accuse the UN of exaggerating the disaster, however – and some Western officials concur, sceptical of self-evaluations from the aid juggernaut. “Levels of trust between donors and the UN system are at a very low ebb”, commented a diplomat.⁷⁹ One factor making it hard to discern the real levels of desperation is the Taliban’s crackdown on free media, which has forced more than half of Afghan journalists to quit their jobs or flee the country.⁸⁰

⁷³ See, for example, “Veiled protest: Afghan women rally in support of the Taliban”, France 24, 11 September 2021.

⁷⁴ Non-combat roles for women in the insurgency included serving as spies, smugglers, couriers, medics, logisticians and recruiters. Seran de Leede, “Afghan Women and the Taliban: An Exploratory Assessment”, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, April 2014. See also Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion* (New York, 2007); and Anand Gopal, “The Other Afghan Women”, *The New Yorker*, 6 September 2021.

⁷⁵ This way of thinking is not unique to the Taliban. A pioneer of contemporary Salafi-jihadist thought, Abdallah Azzam, “considered it more important to protect Islamic culture from foreign influences than for Muslim society to advance materially or technologically”. Thomas Hegghammer, *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad* (Cambridge, 2020), p. 292.

⁷⁶ Graeme Smith and David Mansfield, “The Taliban have claimed Afghanistan’s real economic prize”, *The New York Times*, 18 August 2021.

⁷⁷ The Taliban regime has witnessed a 15 to 30 per cent loss of GDP so far; by comparison, the Venezuelan economy shrank 75 per cent since 2013 without unseating the regime. Vanessa Silva and Gideon Long, “Has Venezuela’s economy bottomed out?”, *Financial Times*, 5 May 2021.

⁷⁸ “Afghanistan: Humanitarian Needs and Planned Response”, UN OCHA, 1 December 2022.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, New York, January 2023.

⁸⁰ Many of the remaining journalists feel pressure to self-censor. “Afghanistan has lost almost 60% of its journalists since the fall of Kabul”, Reporters Without Borders, 10 August 2022.

A final constraint on international actors is the moribund status of political talks with the Taliban. In the aftermath of the Taliban's return to power, Western diplomats worked to define a "roadmap" toward normalising relations with the regime.⁸¹ Visiting delegations sought to inform the Taliban about the Afghan state's international treaty obligations, many of which would (in theory) apply to the new regime, including commitments to women's rights.⁸² Successive heads of the UN political mission to Kabul continued working on this "pathway" over the following months, even as its prospects faded.⁸³

Now, after the Taliban's obscurantist turn in late 2022, the current approach appears to lead nowhere but making the regime a long-term pariah. Despite their initial aspiration to gain legitimacy on the world stage, the Taliban themselves have been expressing more and more cynicism in recent months about doing so. The acting foreign minister hinted as much when he welcomed a delegation of UN officials in January.⁸⁴ For their part, Western officials complain that the Taliban have made no compromises. As the world considers its options, the idea of coaxing the Taliban into behaving like an internationally acceptable government should be set aside for the moment.⁸⁵

B. *The Worst Option: Slamming Doors Shut*

A popular set of options among Western officials to express the unacceptability of the Taliban's policies involve new economic pressures: these might include large-scale cuts to all forms of assistance, including humanitarian aid; additional sanctions against Taliban leaders; and deeper isolation of the regime. Proponents of an abrupt shock say the Taliban must face consequences for their behaviour.⁸⁶ Fringe versions

⁸¹ The "roadmap" or "pathway" concepts were not well-defined. For their part, the Taliban named an envoy who they thought would eventually serve as Kabul's permanent representative to the UN, but the UN's credentials committee has repeatedly deferred the question of accrediting him, leaving the envoy appointed by the previous government to hold Afghanistan's seat; another meeting is scheduled for mid-2023. Michelle Nichols, "Afghan Taliban administration, Myanmar junta not allowed into United Nations for now", Reuters, 15 December 2022.

⁸² For example, under the Taliban, Afghanistan may have violated commitments to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1983), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (2003), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1983), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1994) and several other treaties.

⁸³ Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, 2021-2023.

⁸⁴ In an unusual move, the Taliban posted audio on Twitter of the comments by Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi in his meeting with UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed. "Afghanistan has been sanctioned, the banking system has been sanctioned and our businessmen are facing serious difficulties. They can't even transfer money abroad to import food and fuel", he said. "What action has the UN taken that I can pass on to my leaders and people?" Tweet by Hafiz Zia Ahmad, deputy spokesperson for the minister of foreign affairs, @HafizZiaAhmad1, 10:48pm, 18 January 2023.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, 2021-2023.

⁸⁶ The U.S. imposed additional visa restrictions on Taliban members in February 2023, adding that Washington is still talking with other capitals to find "an approach that makes clear to the Taliban that their actions will carry significant costs and close the path to improved relations with the international community". "Actions to Impose Additional Visa Restrictions in Response to the Taliban's Ban on Women's University Education and Working with NGOs", U.S. Department of State, 1 February 2023.

of this argument call for economic pressure so severe that it forces the population into famine, in hopes of sparking unrest, revolt or civil war that overthrows the Taliban.⁸⁷ More realistic variations claim that, even if the Taliban remain in power, external actors could force the regime into reversing harmful policies – and that, as a result, assistance would eventually reach more people, especially women, even if that means inflicting pain in the short term.⁸⁸

This theory rests on assumptions about the Taliban putting the well-being of citizens and the regime's international standing above their own visions of righteousness. Testing such assumptions would involve a high-stakes gamble with potentially millions of human lives.⁸⁹ Win or lose, the costs of taking the gamble would be paid in large part by Afghan women, as the burdens of the crisis fall disproportionately on them. Women and girls often get the smallest share of food in Afghan families, which means that in times of scarcity they are most vulnerable to malnutrition and disease.⁹⁰ Rising poverty also correlates with growing numbers of child brides, as impoverished families feel pressure to marry girls for dowries; during past humanitarian crises, girls as young as six or seven were sold off or given as brides to settle debts.⁹¹ Breakdowns in the provision of basic services affect women in particularly dangerous ways, especially with regard to childbirth. Nobody knows what political results might follow from slamming the door on the Taliban, but one thing is certain: it would worsen the suffering of women.⁹²

If they leave, international actors may also have a hard time coming back to Afghanistan in the future. Negotiating access to rural communities is not only a matter of getting the Taliban's permission; in many places, NGOs have nurtured relationships with villagers for years, even decades; rebuilding the level of trust they currently enjoy after abandoning these communities would be no small feat. Nor would donors in Western capitals be likely to set demands for resuming aid that the Taliban are realistically going to satisfy. Such an approach is therefore likely to result in the regime's long-term isolation – and more human suffering.

Over the following years, such isolation would stunt the evolution in Afghan society in recent decades, including toward respect for women's rights and other international norms. The Taliban winning the war should not obscure the fact that many Afghans were influenced by exposure to the outside world over the last twenty years.⁹³ There

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interviews, current and former Western officials, 2022 and 2023.

⁸⁸ This argument has international dimensions: Western officials claim that other Islamist movements, such as the Huthis in Yemen, are watching the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan and drawing lessons about what rollbacks of women's rights might result in aid cuts. Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, January 2023.

⁸⁹ Among other things, policymakers should recall the effect of new sanctions in other places. For example, when sanctions tightened on Iran in 2012 and 2013, consumer prices rose by more than 30 per cent annually. Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj and Erica Moret, "The hidden toll of sanctions", *Foreign Policy*, 17 January 2022.

⁹⁰ "The Impact of the Food Crisis on Women and Girls in Afghanistan", CARE International, 28 November 2022.

⁹¹ Crisis Group analyst interviews in a previous capacity, Herat, 2018-2019.

⁹² Crisis Group interviews, UN and NGO staff based in Afghanistan, January 2023.

⁹³ See, for example, Holly Ritchie, "Unwrapping Institutional Change in Fragile Settings: Women Entrepreneurs Driving Institutional Pathways in Afghanistan", *World Development*, vol. 83 (July 2016), pp. 39-53.

is no guarantee that modest steps such as keeping Afghanistan connected to the internet, maintaining electricity supply and funding literacy programs would result in social development that benefits women, but if these and other things are cut off, the outcome for women would likely be worse.

C. *More Constructive Options*

1. Funding humanitarian needs

After recognising the limits of Western power and knowledge, and setting aside unrealistic or disastrous paths, a few unsatisfying options remain for foreign actors in dealing with the dilemmas they face regarding Afghanistan. None of these are sufficient to protect women's rights, but they are the least bad courses of action for Western policymakers.

The humanitarian needs in Afghanistan speak for themselves – with 28 million people needing assistance in 2023, as noted above – and the response from donors should match the scale of the problem. Donors may not entirely trust the UN agencies' assessments, but they should believe the reports from the few other remaining foreign observers in the country. One side effect of the Taliban's tough measures to improve security has been that aid workers and the small contingent of foreign diplomats are travelling further into the countryside than they have in years, where they can see for themselves the destitution left by decades of war.⁹⁴ In any case, major donors have recently adopted a "no regrets" policy of acting early to prevent famines, even when strong data are not yet available.⁹⁵

Humanitarianism requires no justification and should not be conditioned on strategic considerations, but donors have other good reasons to seek stability in Afghanistan. Migrants surged across Afghan borders as the economy collapsed during the first months of the Taliban regime in 2021, though at a slower pace after aid began arriving in higher volumes in 2022. If conditions were to worsen once more, and in the worst case if a famine were to break out, the number of Afghans seeking asylum, as far away as Europe, would skyrocket. Steep aid cuts would also reduce the likelihood of the Taliban keeping their promises to curb narcotics and arms trafficking, which have international ramifications.⁹⁶ The Taliban could also shut down channels of communication with Western intelligence agencies, diminishing their chances of mitigating terrorism threats emanating from Afghanistan.⁹⁷

Policymakers who want to ratchet back assistance should also consider the importance of the aid sector to the Afghan economy. The country needs to reduce its aid dependency, but for now NGOs employ an estimated 150,000 Afghans, including

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, aid workers and Western officials, Kabul, 2022-2023.

⁹⁵ "G7 Famine Prevention and Humanitarian Crises Compact", policy paper, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 5 May 2021.

⁹⁶ The Taliban banned opium cultivation in April 2022, but allowed harvests to go ahead in many places. The full scale of restrictions on poppy crops will not appear on satellite monitoring until the spring of 2023. Experts doubt that bans could be sustained without economic development. See, for example, the Twitter thread by David Mansfield, @mansfieldintinc, 12:24pm, 16 January 2023.

⁹⁷ See, for example, Mohammad Amin Pacha, "Intelligence head Wasiq meets deputy CIA head in Doha: Source", *Tolo News*, 9 October 2022.

more than 50,000 women.⁹⁸ Job losses in the aid sector would be particularly painful because many of the positions are well paid and other employment is scarce: by one estimate, Afghanistan lost 700,000 jobs during the initial months of Taliban rule, or 20 per cent of all employment outside agriculture.⁹⁹

2. Supporting principled aid delivery

If they decide to keep emergency assistance flowing, donors should help the UN and NGOs push back against the Taliban's growing interference in aid delivery. Aid workers in many parts of the world face quandaries as they balance the imperative of saving lives against the principle of ensuring that assistance remains neutral, impartial and free of political considerations. The Taliban's restrictions pose unusually tough questions, however, especially about women's needs and rights. On a daily basis, NGO staff must decide whether to keep delivering assistance in ways the Taliban will allow, which may compromise their women staffers' rights, or to withdraw, which means letting people suffer. Policymakers in Western capitals can offer support for humanitarian agencies facing such decisions in field offices by infusing a dose of flexibility into existing mechanisms. For example, when the Taliban block female aid workers, NGOs should feel capable of pausing their work to negotiate with the regime for better access, without fear of the donors slashing budgets because they have not spent according to the original timeline.¹⁰⁰

Donors will have to contend with a bureaucratic nightmare, because aid agencies never allocate billions of dollars for a crisis while at the same time preparing to hold back large parts of it. But in Afghanistan's present circumstances, donors need to be lenient about their rules in order to give humanitarian agencies the room for manoeuvre they need to uphold the principles governing their work – for example, offering contract extensions to the NGOs they fund. Flexibility will allow quick responses and workarounds that best serve Afghan women and men. In this regard, it is crucial to keep decision-making based in the field, because there is no feasible way of convening senior leaders in Western capitals for emergency meetings after each new harsh edict from Kandahar.¹⁰¹

Diplomats from donor countries should also offer aid organisations the political support they need to push back against the Taliban's restrictions. Humanitarian groups complain that they lack political cover, as Western embassies have been reluctant to send staff back to Kabul in order to keep denying the regime legitimacy.¹⁰² Emergency

⁹⁸ Paul Fishstein, "Latest Taliban draconian restrictions: Now what?", Center on International Cooperation, 12 January 2023.

⁹⁹ "Employment prospects in Afghanistan: A rapid impact assessment", International Labour Organization, January 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Nor should female aid workers have to worry about losing their jobs because donors are reluctant to pay for them working from home; at the same time, their own organisations should not be overzealous with duty-of-care precautions that keep female staff housebound. Crisis Group interviews, UN and NGO staff, January 2023.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interviews, Western officials and aid workers, January 2023. As a senior UN official concluded after meeting the Taliban, "This is not a one-fix wonder". "Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed's press conference upon her return from Afghanistan", press release, UN, 25 January 2023.

¹⁰² Tweet by Jan Eglund, head of the Norwegian Refugee Council, @NRC_Eglund, 9:48pm, 13 January 2023.

relief mechanisms were never intended to serve as the main points of contact between isolated regimes and the outside world.¹⁰³ Re-establishing at least working-level offices would not only assist NGOs but also provide a degree of oversight and independent analysis from the ground. The forthcoming renewal of the UN mission's mandate, in March 2023, also serves as an opportunity for donors to expand the UN's capacity to coordinate international efforts and keep them principled.¹⁰⁴

3. Promoting long-term social change

In the first days after the Taliban's recent rulings, some Western officials pushed for dispatching Muslim religious leaders to persuade the Taliban to reverse course.¹⁰⁵ Such interventions have proven ineffective, so far, as they fail to address the fact that the Taliban's policies are drawn not only from their atypical interpretation of Islam, but also from aspects of local culture.¹⁰⁶ The Taliban's social conservatism is rooted as much, if not more, in the customary practices of rural villages as it is in religious texts. During their years as insurgents, most Taliban fought in close proximity to their own homes.¹⁰⁷ After winning, they are imposing values from traditional parts of the countryside upon very different cultural groups, especially in cities.¹⁰⁸ Moderating the harmful effects of the Taliban takeover is therefore not just a matter of reversing a few bad decisions. It will be a slow process as a divided population struggles to coexist peacefully.¹⁰⁹

Against this backdrop, the outside world should not adopt a posture of cultural relativism. Promotion of human rights, including women's rights, is foundational to the international system and remains a core part of the UN mandate in Afghanistan. Western countries must keep advocating for the rights of all Afghans, including women, minorities and people suffering from poverty.

All advocacy, however, must be judged by whether the messages will actually help the people in need. Too often, criticism of Taliban policy satisfies campaigners outside

¹⁰³ A review of humanitarianism in Yemen concluded that, as in Afghanistan, "when the humanitarian 'instrument' becomes the sole channel for international engagement, there are significant implications for how it should operate, or even whether the current arrangements suffice". "Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis", IASC, 2022.

¹⁰⁴ The UN political mission does not lack staff, but managers do not have enough flexibility to hire experts – for example, Pashto and Dari speakers – who assess risks. UN leadership in the field also needs to feel empowered to take swift action based on experts' analysis. Crisis Group interviews, UN and NGO staff, Kabul, 2022-2023.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, New York, London and Washington, January 2023.

¹⁰⁶ The Taliban usually dismiss criticism from foreign clerics – even from religious figures whom they respect, such as Pakistani scholar Taqi Usmani. "Mufti Usmani urges Taliban to reopen girls' schools", *The Express Tribune*, 22 April 2022.

¹⁰⁷ NATO estimated that 85 to 90 per cent of the insurgents fought near their own homes in response to local grievances. NATO briefing slide, Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program, 8 June 2011.

¹⁰⁸ For example, international NGOs have devoted decades of effort to persuading rural parents to allow their daughters to attend school, especially after puberty. Yet to this day, many are reluctant to send girls to distant secondary schools; offering community-based alternatives closer to home has sometimes let more girls enrol. Crisis Group interview, education specialist, January 2023.

¹⁰⁹ The polarisation in Afghanistan is not just between so-called conservatives and moderates. Research has shown that Afghans from a variety of political, cultural, religious, ethnic and tribal backgrounds consider the opinions held by other Afghans to be "extreme". Graeme Smith and Rahmatullah Amiri, "Extremism in Afghanistan", The Liaison Office, July 2019.

Afghanistan but has the perverse effect of provoking hardliners in the movement to dig in, especially as many of the critics have links to the previous government. The Taliban believe their model for society poses a threat to Western cultural hegemony; to react as though they are correct is to give them far too much credit.

Low-key promotion of social change may be a better response to the Taliban's misogyny, with modest expectations for shifting norms over the course of decades. An immediate step could be safeguarding the Taliban's political opponents, especially women activists, journalists and politicians. More broadly, donors spent billions over the last two decades to foster a new generation of Afghans, mostly in cities, who reject the Taliban's ideology. Under a despotic regime, these Afghans fear persecution and should be granted access to asylum or subsidiary protections.¹¹⁰ Other routes for safe, legal migration should also be considered, at the very least for those most at risk: for example, as part of efforts to support female education, thousands of Afghan women now expelled from universities could be offered scholarships abroad. It might be years before they return home, but diaspora Afghans could help preserve dreams of a better society.¹¹¹

Another way to empower Afghan women over the long term is to help them survive childhood, grow into healthy adults, obtain whatever education is permitted and participate in any economic activities (such as health and primary education) not forbidden by the regime. The largest employer of Afghan women outside the home is the agricultural sector, making irrigation and water infrastructure significant from a gender perspective. Similarly, studies in Afghanistan and other countries have shown that provision of electricity may improve the status of women, making domestic work easier and safer, and allowing them to spend more time on income-generating activities.¹¹² Keeping the lights on will not revolutionise women's rights, but it may allow for better connections with the outside world.¹¹³ Over time, local Taliban authorities might also be persuaded to allow a broader range of programs for women than the emir's rules suggest.¹¹⁴ For example, during the war, community-based education in Taliban heartlands showed promising results for girls, even adolescents.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ For example, the European Union (EU) has concluded that all women and girls are at risk of persecution under the Taliban and should be eligible for refugee status. "Afghanistan: Taliban restrictions on women and girls amount to persecution", EU Agency for Asylum, 25 January 2023.

¹¹¹ The Iranian diaspora may serve as an example. See Mohsen Mostafavi Mobasher (ed.), *The Iranian Diaspora: Challenges, Negotiations and Transformations* (Austin, 2018).

¹¹² See, for example, Karina Standal and Tanja Winther, "Empowerment Through Energy? Impact of Electricity on Care Work Practices and Gender Relations", *Forum for Development Studies*, vol. 43 (2016), pp. 27-45.

¹¹³ For example, NGO workers say electricity shortages are one of the biggest hurdles for female colleagues working from home. Crisis Group interviews, January 2023.

¹¹⁴ Health, hygiene and livelihoods assistance for women were "easily understood" and continued immediately after the Taliban takeover in 2021; other activities such as promoting human rights and running women's shelters paused at first but later resumed "quietly". Fiona Gall, "Research on Challenges, Barriers and Opportunities for Women-led CSOs in the Afghanistan's Humanitarian Crisis", Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group, 30 March 2022.

¹¹⁵ "Feasibility Study: CBE Post Grade 10", BRAC Afghanistan, 2020.

4. Addressing the causes of the disaster

Afghans have received emergency assistance for decades, but the perpetual state of calamity cannot last: the Afghan economy must be rebuilt, along with the state's capacity to deliver essential services. Investments in critical infrastructure and other development efforts must not be delayed, because there is no alternative for meeting Afghans' basic needs. Humanitarian agencies are blunt about the grim fact that their own work is insufficient and unsustainable, a set of stopgaps. Without more durable solutions, the humanitarian situation will further deteriorate.¹¹⁶

Part of the reason why the status quo risks falling apart is the growing disillusionment among Western donors, who are losing patience, cutting budgets and expressing well-founded scepticism about the aid industry. Another factor is the impatience of Taliban officials, who are adamant about freeing themselves from dependence on foreign aid. Taliban officials sometimes compare aid to an "IV drip", an intravenous feed that sustains life but also keeps the patient tethered.¹¹⁷ To some degree, the Taliban are correct that today's aid systems are designed to work around their regime and therefore do not contribute to rebuilding the state apparatus: the refrain among Western donors is, "Help Afghans without helping the Taliban."¹¹⁸

This slogan implies a far-fetched scenario, however, in which donors could teleport all manner of humanitarian and development aid to the Afghan people without touching the Taliban-controlled state. Even if such fiction were reality, it would require donors to fund vast parallel structures to circumvent the Taliban, costing billions of dollars per year.¹¹⁹ Such a system would be unaffordable: foreign countries do not have the money to subsidise the welfare of tens of millions of Afghans for years on end. With food insecurity near starvation levels, the Afghan economy must expand to save lives. Achieving that development will require donors to engage with the Taliban-controlled state, and economic growth will necessarily bring additional tax and customs revenue to the Taliban authorities. Much as donors would like to deny the regime such benefits, they cannot be avoided.

The regime has earned such opprobrium that Western officials cancelled or delayed plans to discuss investments in infrastructure, but these conversations cannot be put off forever if international actors wish to see Afghanistan stabilise. High-level engagement with the Taliban is necessary to draft the outlines of a plan for a path to recovery. A plan for Afghan self-sufficiency should start with the water, electricity, transport and other projects halted when the Taliban took over in 2021. These plans build on the previous government's consultations with Afghan women and men about their

¹¹⁶ This theme has been recurrent in humanitarian agencies' analysis. The UN's under secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, Martin Griffiths, himself told the Security Council that "there has been a paucity of progress on restarting urgently needed development initiatives without which the humanitarian situation is likely to further deteriorate". "Statement for the Security Council Briefing on the Humanitarian Situation in Afghanistan", UN OCHA, 20 December 2022.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Kabul, October 2022.

¹¹⁸ Peter Juul, "Helping Afghans without Helping the Taliban", Center for American Progress, 11 July 2022.

¹¹⁹ Some Western officials say one of their objectives is to limit the Taliban regime's fiscal space in order to prevent "excessive" military spending. No one, however, has articulated how much funding for security forces should be permitted. Nor have the Taliban published national budgets that would allow debate on the subject. Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, 2022.

needs; any elaboration should, where possible, create opportunities for inclusion of Afghan women in project design and implementation.¹²⁰ Donors could also help re-establish prudent macro-economic management, including rehabilitating the central bank. The Afghan economy has always depended on access to the outside world, and businesses often complain that Western isolation of the regime has made it harder to buy spare parts, acquire new machinery, conduct cross-border trade and meet with clients outside the country.¹²¹

In some places, modest investments could complete development projects that were abandoned after the previous government fell. Donors have already spent more than \$2.8 billion on these projects, many of them at least 80 per cent finished, according to recent estimates.¹²² Contractors who spoke to Crisis Group say building dams, paving roads and stringing electrical lines now costs less than half of what it did before 2021, because the war drove up security costs and demands for bribes.¹²³ Completing projects such as the CASA-1000 electrical corridor, bringing energy from Central to South Asia, would also offer benefits to neighbouring countries, offering an incentive for cooperation. For the moment, however, there is little prospect of regional powers such as China funding major development efforts, and the Taliban lack the means to do it themselves.¹²⁴

One reason why Western powers may wish to help finish such projects relates to the loss and damage inflicted by climate change, for which they bear no small responsibility; after all, the richest countries of the world generated half the planet-warming emissions over the last 170 years.¹²⁵ Afghanistan is one of the countries that are most vulnerable to gradual temperature increases (up 1.8 degrees Celsius since 1950), which have caused prolonged bouts of dryness followed by erratic precipitation, resulting in droughts and floods (see Appendix A). Water infrastructure is also minimal: Afghanistan has just two cubic km of storage capacity in dams and the like, the equivalent of 7 per cent of neighbouring Pakistan's and 5 per cent of Iran's.¹²⁶ Even as it gets harder to grow food, Afghans have more mouths to feed: since the 1990s, the country's population has tripled.¹²⁷ Since 80 per cent of the population depends on agriculture for their livelihoods, funding water management projects would go a long way toward addressing the basic needs of millions of Afghans.¹²⁸

¹²⁰ Such engagement remains highly contentious among Western donors, with some pushing for deeper isolation of the regime. Crisis Group Special Briefing N°8, *Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023*, 14 September 2022.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interviews, Afghan business owners, Istanbul and Dubai, 2022-2023.

¹²² Examples include unfinished irrigation canals, watershed projects, dams, culverts, flood protection systems, electrical lines, power plants, roads, water supply systems, electricity substations, highways and bridges. Crisis Group interviews, Afghan development experts, Kabul and Toronto, 2022.

¹²³ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish and Afghan business owners, Istanbul, October-November 2022.

¹²⁴ An exception is the Qush Tepa Irrigation Canal, a project intended to water 700,000 acres of farmland in northern Afghanistan, which the Taliban claim to be self-financing. "Minister Of Finance Visits Qush Tepa Irrigation Canal", press release, Afghan Ministry of Finance, 10 December 2022.

¹²⁵ Nadja Popovich and Brad Plumer, "Who has the most historical responsibility for climate change?", *The New York Times*, 12 November 2021.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Afghan water experts, December 2022.

¹²⁷ "World Population Prospects 2022", UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022.

¹²⁸ Nasrat Sayed and Said Hashmat Sadat, "Climate Change Compounds Longstanding Displacement in Afghanistan", Migration Policy Institute, 29 June 2022.

VI. Conclusion

The Taliban's worsening behaviour risks provoking abrupt cut-offs of international aid that would profoundly harm millions of Afghans. Western policymakers must stand up for Afghan women and girls. At the same time, they should be careful to avoid self-defeating policies. Practical steps that materially benefit Afghan women, improving their lives in tangible ways, would be superior to angry denunciations of the Taliban's wrongheadedness. Beyond emergency assistance, long-term efforts must continue to develop the economy. That would help Afghans to recover from what was for years the world's deadliest war, and slowly extricate Western countries from a toxic relationship with the Taliban. If the international system can find a liminal space between pariah and legitimate status that allows Afghanistan to keep functioning, it would undermine the Taliban's overheated rhetoric about a titanic clash between Islam and the West.

At the same time, the outside world should be clear-eyed about its own insignificance in the next chapter of Afghan history. The Taliban have wrested power away from their enemies, and now they themselves are mostly to blame for what happens in the coming years. The clerics of Kandahar may find that unpopular decisions are hard to enforce – and that they lead to violence. Insurgents in the northern mountains are already using the plight of women as a rallying cry. Even if the Taliban continue doing well at crushing resistance, their misrule will hamstring the economy, scare off investors and encourage more Afghans to leave the country.

The Taliban should find a better way of making decisions, instead of following the whims of a leader who has proven his determination to oppress women and block the rebuilding of his country. Until that happens, the future of Afghanistan looks bleak.

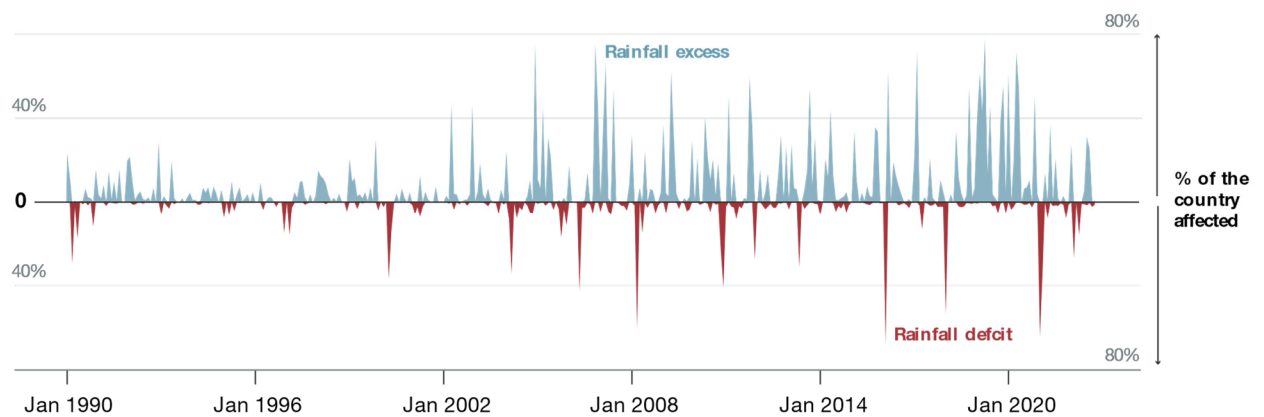
Kabul/Brussels, 23 February 2023

Appendix A: Afghanistan's Climate Challenges

Climate change is worsening the problems facing the Afghan economy. The agricultural sector is the largest employer, but farmers struggle with more and more extreme rainfall and dry spells: too much water or too little. Precipitation has become increasingly anomalous in recent years, taking a toll on harvests. Both rainfall excesses (blue) and deficits (red) have become more intense (darker shading), affecting larger areas (height) for longer periods of time (width), heightening flood and droughts risks. These trends underline the need for better water infrastructure and other climate adaptations.

Abnormal Precipitation in Afghanistan

Percentage of the country area affected between January 1990 and October 2022



Source: The chart depicts monthly precipitation anomalies, based on CHIRPS data at a spatial resolution of approximately 5km pixels. Z-scores are considered at the pixel level, comparing each month's precipitation to that of the same month of previous years, 1990-2022. $Z\text{-score} = (\text{prec}_{i,m,y} - \text{Mean_prec}_{i,m}) / (\text{SD_prec}_{i,m} + 0.01)$, with i , m and y denoting the pixel, month and year, respectively. A small value of 0.01 is added to the denominator, to avoid high z-scores in areas with low inter-annual precipitation variability. Next, the sum of pixels with z-scores below (above) 1 are summarised to derive the share of the country affected by rainfall deficit (excess) in a given month. UE / CG / CB-G / CRISIS GROUP.

Appendix B: Map of Afghanistan



Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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