

CHS Policy Briefing | September 2021

# Afghanistan under Renewed Taliban Rule

Charting a Pathway to Inclusive and Effective Governance

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CENTER FOR CONFLICT AND HUMANITARIAN STUDIES

## Afghanistan under Renewed Taliban Rule: Charting a Pathway to Inclusive and Effective Governance

13 September 2021

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\* I am grateful for the support and contributions by the CHS team: Sana Tariq, Sansom Milton, Abeedah Diab and Rand Odeh.

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## Introduction

The collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on August 15th, 2021 and the ensuing images broadcast out of Kabul – Taliban soldiers in the Presidential Palace and scenes of desperation at Hamad Karzai International Airport – shocked the world with the speed at which the country hurtled towards chaos. In the month since, Afghanistan has become enveloped with a series of political, security, and humanitarian crises that are threatening the lives of millions and planting the seeds of new conflict. The UN Secretary General has convened a High-Level Ministerial Meeting on the Humanitarian Situation in Afghanistan on September 13th to organise funding and aid modalities in light of the serious risks to impartial humanitarian assistance and protection of development gains, particularly for women and girls.

What is most surprising, however, is that the chaos from August 15th was neither inevitable nor expected. The writing on the wall had been clear to all parties in the conflict well before the fall of Kabul: the two Afghan sides had undertaken carefully considered negotiations in the weeks leading up to the 15th for a peaceful end to the conflict that would preserve national stability. The Republic, the Taliban, and the US had drawn up an agreement that would entail a two-week transitional period and ceasefire, the security of Kabul maintained by the Republic, and the US with NATO forces conducting the airport evacuation. To all but a handful of individuals, this was the expected arrangement between all sides going into the 15th.

The plan was upended when former President Ashraf Ghani fled the country at the alleged urging of palace security, which led to the total collapse of the security system in Kabul within hours. While this sudden action by the former president was the single most decisive act for the post-conflict transition, it is important to balance it with a view of the long efforts of a broader and inclusive group of Afghans on both sides to negotiate a peaceful and orderly transfer of power.

The counterfactual – what would have happened if the former president had not fled? – is important to keep in mind because it depicts what was expected and planned by the Afghan parties and the US: a stable and inclusive transitional process to end the conflict, the culmination of the almost year-long Doha process. Furthermore, it contextualises the specific challenges facing the present Taliban government, who have been propelled into government – and therefore responsibility for managing the national crises – more quickly and with less preparation than they originally planned for. Recommendations to the new Taliban government for a stable post-conflict order must be tailored to the challenges of the context in which they entered power as well as the well-known organisational deficiencies of the Taliban movement.

To this effect, this policy brief presents contextualised recommendations for a time-bound roadmap to a transitional process to the Taliban and the international community in order to urgently restore stable conditions in Afghanistan and prevent the country from falling into a humanitarian disaster. This policy brief originated from a joint discussion organised at CHS on 7

September, 2021 with the recommendations reflecting consensus views from participants from the former Government, the Taliban, and civil society as interpreted by the author.

## An Intra-Afghan Agreement for the Peaceful Transfer of Power

Precipitated by the US-NATO military withdrawal from Afghanistan over the summer months, provinces across the country fell to the Taliban in rapid succession from the west and approaching the capital in the east. The Republic reinforced battalions in the districts around Kabul, but the slew of Republican-held towns surrendering to the Taliban or soldiers abandoning their outposts made the reality of the military situation apparent. The diminishing prospects of holding a defence against the Taliban advance were clear to the political leadership in Kabul.

The Islamic Republic first raised the need for a formal handover of power with Taliban negotiators in Doha a month before August 15th. In the week leading up to the Taliban military approach on Kabul, the Afghan sides and the US, with Qatari facilitation, had concluded an agreement acceptable to all sides. The Republic would preserve the internal security of Kabul and maintain control over the civilian side of Hamid Karzai International Airport. It was accepted by all, including the man himself, that President Ghani would have to resign and, under the agreement, would be expected to constitutionally transfer power to a Taliban-led transitional government after two weeks. The US with NATO would control the military section of HKI Airport to conduct its evacuations, primarily of foreigners. At the centre of the deal was the need for deconfliction between the US and the Taliban, the latter of whom pledged to remain outside of Kabul and far from any possible collision with international troops.

The Taliban leaders themselves were committed to remaining outside of the city out of an awareness that the movement's combatants were not trained to police a densely populated urban environment. The movement had not held a provincial capital since Kunduz in 2015, and many of their soldiers had never seen Kabul before. The leadership was aware of the gap in its combatants' capacities to make the leap from waging war and providing security in rural environments to governing a complex urban space home to 6 million civilians. The decentralised nature of the movement's patchwork of units and the lack of professionalisation among its combatants result in a constant tension between the political leadership and military commanders over enforcing strict control. As part of the agreement, the police forces and national army of the Islamic Republic would have been maintained for the Taliban's combatants to integrate into at a later date during the formal transition process.

On the morning of the 15th, the leadership of the Islamic Republic was in consensus with the Taliban on the arrangements to initiate the transitional process. The head of the Taliban's military commission strongly warned their combatants against entering the city. The Republican President's Chief of Staff reassured Kabul residents, "Please don't worry. There is no problem. The situation of Kabul is under control" (Mohammad & Allahoum 2021). The Interior Minister

released a recording on social media, “The Afghan people should not worry... There will be no attack on the city and there will be a peaceful transfer of power to the transitional government” (Bloomberg 2021). A senior palace official expressed relief upon hearing that Vice President Amrullah Saleh had left that morning for Panjshir with weapons, as it indicated that the location of the battle had been transferred outside of Kabul.

The President’s sudden departure was a complete shock to palace officials including his senior advisors, save for a small handful. He had left without a word during the lunch break at noon, the buzz of his helicopters indiscernible from the sky full of American ones monitoring the city. The news spread rapidly that the President had fled and the city’s entire security system effectively collapsed within an hour. An opportunistic rampage of bandits disguised as the Taliban began to rob banks and private houses. Kabul was quickly coming under the threat of widespread chaos.

Senior officials of the Islamic Republic, including the former President Hamid Karzai, requested the Taliban to enter Kabul to restore security. The Taliban, though suspicious of the eleventh-hour collapse of the agreement that had been weeks in the making, decided to enter the city and take responsibility for the security situation. They arrived in Kabul in the late afternoon and were in the palace by six o’clock in the evening. A former Republican official attributed the quick restoration of order in Kabul to the swift action taken by the Taliban.

## The Taliban Interim Period and Expectations for Inclusivity

Contrary to the view that the intra-Afghan peace process based in Doha failed to make serious progress towards a negotiated transfer of power, the events leading up to the 15th demonstrate that the Afghan sides had drawn up an amicable agreement between themselves and the Americans. Except for a small but influential group of people, the Afghan sides were on the same page over the transition of power. The majority of officials in the militarily-defeated Islamic Republic were able to distinguish between what was required for the stability of Afghanistan and what would advance the interests of a few.

The shared goal that the Afghan sides had worked towards for an orderly transition has been overshadowed by the chaos that ensued at the airport when the agreement collapsed. But the ability of the two sides to arrive at a negotiated agreement to constitutionally transfer power demonstrates not only the Islamic Republic’s pragmatism, but the Taliban’s long-term strategy of negotiating surrenders from the provinces.

For over half a year prior to the fall of Kabul, tribal leaders in the Taliban movement had negotiated with the military and civilian powerbrokers in local governments to bargain for surrenders on terms acceptable to both sides. The promises from the Taliban entailed amnesty and protection, and the possibility for some provincial governors that they would be restored to their positions after a year. The offers were appealing enough that, in some provinces, local governments initiated negotiations with the Taliban after they had heard the experiences of



other provinces. Both the Taliban and the Islamic Republic had adopted long-term strategies for negotiating a peaceful end to the conflict, albeit via different tracks.

In the immediate days after coming to power, the Taliban leadership indicated some understanding of the form of inclusive governance required to reassure the Afghan people and the international community that the movement could unify the country's different groups in a representative rights-based government. Afghans and international observers viewed the actions optimistically as reformist against the policies the movement implemented in the mid-1990s. The Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahed announced a general amnesty, prohibition on retributive acts by Taliban including murder and theft, respect for women's rights under the shari'a, protections for religious and ethnic minorities, and the resumption of schooling for girls and boys (AJE 2021c; AJE 2021d). Negotiations were underway with former President Hamid Karzai and former Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, Abdullah Abdullah, to form an inclusive government (AJE 2021d). Two days after the fall of Kabul, a media interview between a Taliban official and a woman anchor was broadcast on the country's largest news agency. Media agencies were also assured of the right to continue their work (Relman 2021). Taliban guards stationed in the capital permitted women and other Afghans to protest and demonstrate against them (Jain and Marks 2021).

The chaotic chain of events that propelled the Taliban into power, however, contributed to a set of growing problems for the movement in Kabul and other urban centres. The deficiencies in the movement's policing capabilities came into the spotlight with their heavy-handed use of force against protestors. An orderly and constitutional handover of power would have tempered the number of protestors who felt compelled to demonstrate in the streets, as the planned transitional process would have assured these individuals of continued stability and their basic rights in an inclusive Afghan society. Moreover, if the Islamic Republic's institutions of the police and the national army had continued to function, as stipulated under the original agreement, the possibility of unarmed civilians being violently suppressed would have been averted.

Within a month of entering power, the situation had deteriorated for the Taliban government, and the hopes of the Afghan people were falling in the ability of the Taliban to end the cycle of conflict in Afghanistan. The Taliban showed an inability to peacefully manage the popular demonstrations in Kabul and other major cities in early September. Protests for women's rights and against Pakistani intervention were met with undue violence in some Kabul neighbourhoods and a number of journalists covering the protests were detained and tortured (Latifi 2021). Targeted assassinations were also carried out against former NDS and other vulnerable groups such as journalists and civil society activists in Kabul and other areas in the country.

On 7 September, the composition of the caretaker government was announced and it fell far short of the expectations of Afghans that non-Taliban figures, women, Shi'a, and other groups would be represented in a transitional government body. All of the ministerial appointments went to Taliban, with 31 out of 34 appointments representing Pashtuns. It came under harsh

criticism from other Afghan political parties over the monopolisation of government posts (Yaad 2021). Some have argued that the reason behind the Taliban's non-inclusive caretaker government was the movement's fear of the risk of internal fracture if key individuals were not given ministerial portfolios (Rahimi 2021). It raises the question of how the movement can govern a country of many diverse political parties if it struggles to govern even among its own members. The response from many Afghan people and the international community towards the acting cabinet has been scepticism that the movement has fundamentally transformed from their oppressive policies of the 1990s to accommodate the progressive gains made by Afghans in the last two decades.

## International Recognition Remains Elusive

International recognition is key to the success of a new government's relations with the international community; it is the gateway for the government to access international assistance, foreign direct investment, and equal membership in international fora. The importance of obtaining international recognition is even more acute for a state as dependent on international aid revenues as Afghanistan, where aid flows are equal to 43 percent of GDP (World Bank 2021). Even if a reduction in the state's military and counterterrorism expenditures is factored into the post-conflict government budget, there is a tremendous gap between the aims of the Taliban government to lead national recovery and development strategies for Afghanistan and the finances available to it.

Relying on domestic revenues alone and in isolation from the international community is not a feasible strategy for long-term reconstruction and development in Afghanistan. This will likely lead the Taliban government to align its foreign policy aims with international partners willing to offer financial support; if Western countries withhold that form of engagement, the Taliban will likely look east to China and Russia.

The recognition of any new government in Afghanistan is complicated by a number of factors, including questions over the constitutional basis of President Ghani's resignation, the nature of the confused transition of power to the Taliban, and the use of violence by the Taliban against Afghan and foreign nationals (Paddeu & Pavlopoulos 2021). The makeup of the caretaker government and the announcement of the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan only serve to create an additional obstacle and detract from the Taliban's goal of obtaining international *de jure* legitimacy. The international community is not attempting to impose alien values on Afghanistan in desiring to see an inclusive government. Modes of consensus and inclusion are deeply rooted bedrocks of Afghan society that must serve as the basis for any legitimisation of the new political order.

The United States has stated that recognition is a long way off whilst the European Union and the United Kingdom have not recognised the new government (Reuters 2021; AJE 2021e). These



leading international actors – having invested much in the way of resources and human lives in rebuilding Afghanistan over the past two decades – are unlikely to recognise the Emirate anytime soon. The appointment of Sirajuddin Haqqani, who is subject to UN Security Council sanctions, as the Acting Minister of Interior sent a particularly provocative message to the international community. During the period of one-party rule under the Islamic Emirate from 1996 to 2001 only three countries bestowed diplomatic recognition: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. It is unlikely that any of these states would re-establish formal recognition with a one-party Islamic Emirate, with Pakistan stating that offering recognition would be a “regional decision” to be taken after multilateral consultations with regional and international powers (Dawn 2021).

The list of countries invited to the announcement of the new Afghan government – China, Russia, Pakistan, Qatar, Iran, and Turkey – is a signal of where the Taliban views its best chances of international recognition. Russia and Turkey have not rushed into offering recognition, publicly calling for the formation of an inclusive government. The Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu tweeted that ‘Our advice to the world is that we should not make hasty decisions about recognizing the Taliban’ (Erim 2021). Prior to the announcement of the caretaker government, Lolwah Al-Khater, Qatar’s Assistant Foreign Minister, told AFP that the Taliban ‘have shown a great deal of pragmatism. Let’s seize the opportunities there... and look at their public actions. We don’t rush to a recognition. But we don’t completely disengage with the Taliban... we take the middle way’ (Lauras 2021).

## Aid, Dependency and Leverage

Regardless of the question of recognition, it is vital that life-saving humanitarian aid is allowed to continue. MSF and other aid groups have warned of an impending humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan, the collapse of the public health system, and major food shortages (AJE 2021a). The European Union also has a vested interest in averting a major displacement crisis, knowing that Iran and Turkey will open the gates for refugees to enter Europe. Yet whilst most donors wish to avoid a humanitarian crisis, any aid for Afghanistan is constrained by the potential negative domestic reaction to being perceived as supporting the Taliban.

To circumnavigate this dilemma, many donors have undertaken to maintain their humanitarian operations but channelled through non-state organizations so as not to confer any legitimacy by association on the new Emirate. Yet over the long-term, such a model of humanitarian governance will likely replicate the pathologies of the international aid system under which non-state, parallel capacities emerge to provide essential social services, thereby detracting from the fundamental task of rebuilding state institutions and trust between government and citizens.

Afghanistan’s dependency on external assistance has been dealt a further blow by the U.S. decision to freeze \$9.5 billion in assets held by the Afghan Central Bank, due to the Taliban’s

designation on the Treasury Department's sanctions list (Paddeu and Pavlopoulos 2021). The World Bank has cut off its funding to Afghanistan and it is reported that the future of the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund is unclear (AJE 2021b). The U.S. and others view this aid dependence as a source of leverage, hoping that a carrot and stick approach can persuade the Taliban to adopt moderate positions.

The former governor of Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB) outlines several key challenges to macro-economic stabilization. The DAB will likely be sanctioned by much of the rest of the world and Afghanistan does not print its own currency, creating conditions for fiscal and monetary crises. Furthermore, planned economic infrastructure projects that would have brought additional revenue, such as a \$7 billion Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India natural gas pipeline project, will no longer go ahead, and expectations of profiting from mineral resources will likely fall given the reputational risks of any international companies cooperating with the Taliban government on such ventures (Ahmady 2021).

## Recommendations

After several decades, Afghanistan has once again been united under one order; the interests of the Taliban to promote development, recovery, and national independence in Afghanistan align with the interests of the Afghan people and those of the international community, with the exception of counter-terrorism. The re-unification of the country was accomplished by the Taliban through force, but the time of the sword has reached a necessary end if the country is to remain under the control of one government. The challenges facing the Taliban government are enormous, as previous regimes failed on this task in succession (the recent Islamic Republic, as well as the Mujahedeen government and the Communist regime). Under those administrations, pockets of discontent in the provinces and sparks of uprising in bastions like Panjshir never disappeared, nurturing the seed for endless conflict.

Time is of the essence to restore calm, assuage people's concerns of livelihoods and personal safety, and to transition into the next phase of government administration for a peaceful order. The following recommendations speak to the urgent actions required by the Taliban and the international community in order to stabilise the volatile situation and prevent decline into turmoil. While many of these actions can only be implemented by the Taliban, they will be the determinants of the response from the international community towards engagement in Afghanistan.

### **Set Out a Clear, Time-Bound Roadmap for the Transition to an Inclusive Government**

**Commit to the formation of an inclusive government representing all Afghans:** With Afghanistan unified under a single state authority for the first time in decades, the Taliban leadership should

end the zero-sum game of ethnic rivalries and form an inclusive government under which the interests of the movement are aligned with the interests of Afghanistan and the Afghan people. The composition of the caretaker government confirmed the fear of many people that the Taliban will seize their time in power as an opportunity to reward the movement's interests at the expense of the interests of broader political constituencies. Former officials of the Islamic Republic are also doubtful of the sincerity of intentions of the Taliban leadership towards inclusive governance.

That the Taliban would maintain control over the critical ministries of defence, finance, interior and external affairs was expected, but an opportunity was missed when service-orientated ministries, such as health and education, were also monopolised. It should be viewed as an opportunity to integrate political inclusion into the government through the appointment of individuals with strong technical competencies. Afghanistan has received two decades of concerted international assistance to build the technical and administrative capacities of the Afghan people, from all ethnic and religious backgrounds, in public governance. This is the key population of skilled civil servants, public interest professionals, and civil society experts who are trained to lead in running an effective government. Appointing representatives of these skilled and diverse groups (regardless of their ethnicity or political orientation) among even deputy ministers in the acting government is highly advised and important to counter the doubts concerning the sincerity of intentions of the Taliban leadership towards inclusive governance.

**Organise a loya jirga to reach a national consensus for an inclusive government:** The arrangements that had to be called off by the sudden departure of President Ghani on the 15th August included an agreement to convene a loya jirga (meeting of the elders). The loya jirga is a traditional Afghan method of striking a consensus among the country's tribes on decisions of national importance. An immediate announcement for convening a loya jirga in the coming weeks will initiate the process of developing a broad consensus for the formation of a legitimate, representative, and inclusive government. Although some Taliban leaders believe that the time of the jirga passed with the chaotic fall of Kabul and collapse of the agreement with President Ghani, the rising political divisions in Afghanistan warrant returning to popular methods of government legitimation. The loya jirga enjoys legitimacy among the Islamic Republic and the Taliban and across urban and rural populations. Hosting a 2-day interim session and inviting representatives from all the provinces to appoint the next permanent government, with the last day scheduled for the inauguration, would signal to the Afghan people that the Taliban is willing to govern in the national interest. Foreign representatives from Afghanistan's neighbours may be invited to attend to observe and show international support for the proceedings.

## What's in a Name? Symbols of a Unified Afghan Nation

**Reach a consensus on a unifying name for the Government of Afghanistan; do not revert to the Islamic Emirate:** The recent indications that the Taliban is considering unilaterally announcing

the return of the Islamic Emirate is a concerning indication that the movement has begun to celebrate their military victory without humility (Barakat 2021; NYT 2021). As long as the Government of Afghanistan carries the name of the Taliban through the Islamic Emirate, the Taliban will struggle to re-unite the will of the Afghan people.

If the Taliban take the interests of the Afghan people as their first priority over the self-interest of the movement, the debate over the name of the IEA should not carry such meaning. Reverting to the Islamic Emirate will alienate many Afghans, as well as the country's neighbours and the international community. The extended Troika (USA, Russia, China, Pakistan) issued a joint statement at the intra-Afghan Moscow Conference in March 2021 that rejected the restoration of the Islamic Emirate (MFA Russia 2021). Some have proposed 'The Islamic State of Afghanistan' as a compromise between 'The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan' and the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan'.

**Replacing the current flag of Afghanistan is a divisive issue for most Afghans:** The flag is a significant symbol of identity of the Afghan people and their connection to their state. It came into being in 1919 as the flag of the independence of Afghanistan from the British and then went on to represent the anti-Soviet jihad. It is the flag of everybody and nobody.

A lesson should be learned from the mistake Jamiat-e-Islami made in 1992 when they changed the tricolour to their party colours of green, white and black. Many Afghans at that time lost their sense of connection to a unifying symbol that had been replaced by the marker of one organisation. There is some positive indication that the Taliban are willing to maintain the flag, at least for the time being. Mullah Baradar, the Deputy Head of the Political Commission, met the German Foreign Minister with the traditional flag behind him – as did Abbas Stanikzai, lead negotiator for the Taliban Negotiating Team in Doha, with a Chinese delegation. It is important to note that the Taliban founder, Mullah Omar, was reported to not have taken an issue with the flag.

The practicality of changing the flag may also be a restraining factor – under their last government in the 1990s, the Taliban used the Communist-era passports for five years out of an inability to manage the logistics of replacing them.

## **Resolve the Immediate Concerns of the Afghan People to Restore Calm**

The need to “make the Afghan people comfortable” takes immediate priority over the more divisive political issues under debate in Afghanistan. Once people are reassured that their livelihoods are not at risk, the level of panic will subside enough to be able to distinguish the core demands of Afghan citizens that the Taliban government should deal with.

When the Islamic Republic collapsed, there was alarm amongst the people as to whether or not the government would continue to function. Now that it has become clear that there will be efforts

for continuity of the State and the social services it provides, the Afghan people are concerned about when those necessities will return for the resumption of daily life. These anxieties are greatest in the urban centres where people are dependent on a functioning financial system to subsist. Businesses should be open, people should be able to make purchases and pay for their orders, and banks should be able to meet normal daily demands.

If the Taliban are able to bring life back to normal and pull Afghanistan out of the chaos that was left behind by the previous rulers, it will send an important signal to the Afghan public of the Taliban's ability to govern.

**Pay civil servant salaries on an urgent priority basis:** One of the most significant steps that can be taken by the Taliban government is to pay the salaries of civil servants. The country's civil servants, comprising 424,000 employees, are a critical population in Afghanistan who possess the technical skill that will be necessary to support the government in leading a smooth transitional period. An absence of trained staff will spell disaster across the government's ministries and paralyse the regular functioning of basic services – just as the absence of trained air traffic controllers at the Kabul airport (who were evacuated first) led to an inability to manage the flows of people arriving on the tarmac.

In accordance with Shari'a law, payment of civil servant salaries is an incumbent duty of the government. This level of financial management is new and alien to the Taliban, most of whom are accustomed to living by humble means and are perplexed by how high government salaries are in Kabul. The Taliban are constrained by the international asset freeze of Afghanistan's bank reserves and find themselves in the midst of a financial crisis with little experience in managing financial institutions of this scale. Even prior to the takeover of Kabul, civil servant salaries had not been fully paid under the previous government, with the government claiming that this was the effect of the US cutting USD 1 billion in aid in 2019. As of the time of the publication of this policy brief, civil servant salaries are at least two months behind.

The penury of the Afghan state is a formidable hurdle the Taliban will have to resolve, because the psychological impact from the government being able to deliver even one month of government salaries would be significant. It would send the clear message that life is back to normal and help to restore a level of calm among the people.

**Deploy police in government uniform in Kabul and the main cities:** The swift actions taken by the Taliban to restore security in Kabul on 15 August and prevent the spread of looting signalled strong credibility that the movement will be able to maintain law and order. The political leadership has demonstrated a significant level of commitment to take corrective actions on security issues. In the aftermath of the Taliban's celebratory firing on 30 and 31 August that killed two civilians and injured a dozen more, the Taliban removed the police chief and arrested and disarmed the unit responsible.

Professional policing in urban cities is a significant challenge for the movement and will require long-term training as part of the development of national security institutions in the new government. In the immediate term, the deployment of police in government uniform to the main cities, with instructions on how to peacefully manage protests, will alleviate the atmosphere of insecurity and initiate the process of the Taliban providing professionalised civilian-centred security to Afghanistan's urban centres.

## Fulfil the Good Promises that Have Been Made

Back in July 2021, at the Afghanistan Conference, held in Rome, Mawlawi Abdul Salam Hanafi, Taliban deputy to the caretaker PM, made some well received foundational pledges for an inclusive peaceful resolution to the conflict. Many of those promises were reaffirmed by Zabihullah Mujahed, the Taliban spokesperson, on 17 August. It is critical that a participatory process of turning those ideals into policy is launched with a set of clear targets and timeframes. Putting those promises into practice will not only comfort the people of Afghanistan but will also help assure Afghanistan's neighbours and the wider international community that the multitude of complex challenges to the peaceful transition of power will be resolved.

**Reassure women and minorities of their rights and representation:** Clear commitments should be made that the next government will respect the important role of women and religious and ethnic minorities in society as a whole, and their representation in the public sphere – to work, attend school, and move freely – will be guaranteed under the next government. The wave of women's rights demonstrations over the past month have indicated the potential of this issue to alienate a sizeable proportion of the population, particularly for the large number of women-headed households in Afghanistan. Male civil servants have been called back to work in the days following the announcement of the government, but women employees continue to be ordered to remain at home. Only in the education and health sectors have women staff been permitted to return to work (Khan et al. 2021).

Taliban officials have met with religious minorities to assure them that they will continue to enjoy the freedom to practice their religion. However, the freedom will not be enshrined as a right in the next Constitution, which will be based on Hanafi fiqh solely, as in the 1964 version. The right will be allowed in practice, but will not constitute a written legal guarantee. For some groups with different legal property practices, such as the Shi'a, this will entail a challenge open to exploitation.

**Draw a careful line for relations with Pakistan and other neighbours:** The Taliban's relationship with their patron, Pakistan – and the perceptions of it among the urban Afghan population – is a cause of great frustration among Afghans who desire independence from illegitimate regional intervention. At the delicate time of the interim process, it is best to approach Afghanistan's relationships with her neighbours with sensitivity to avoid hostile media depictions that



the Taliban government takes instructions from external actors. The wave of anti-Pakistan demonstrations in the cities following the visit of the head of Pakistan's intelligence services to Kabul seriously damaged the Taliban's image of autonomy, which the Taliban was unable to undo with its statement that the Pakistani official was not invited. The government's unofficial external relations with neighbours should be treated with more diplomatic sensitivity to maintain stability, given the bloody history of Afghanistan's relations with her neighbours.

**Deliver on the commitments made by the Taliban to counterterrorism:** The appointment of some acting ministers in the interim government has inflamed concerns about the Taliban's association with terrorist groups sanctioned both internationally and regionally. The UN Security Council reported in June that the Taliban has not broken from Al Qaeda, with strong marital and kinship ties continuing to exist between the two groups (UN 2021). Unless immediate clear and credible commitments to counter-terrorism are made, the concern over whether Afghanistan will once again become a hotbed for global terrorism will dictate many of the next government's relations with its neighbours and the international community.

## Prioritise Humanitarian Access for the Long-Term

**Protect the existing humanitarian system in Afghanistan; do not damage it by applying conditions on humanitarian aid:** Negotiations between international donors, states, and the Taliban for foreign direct investment and development assistance should clearly separate their activities from life-saving assistance. It is in the interests of both the Taliban, who will not be blamed for the blocking of emergency aid, and the international community, who will neither contribute to conditions for a preventable humanitarian disaster but will still be able to negotiate the terms of engagement with the Taliban.

It is critical that emergency relief and aid for basic services should flow to vulnerable populations in need of the world's assistance, regardless of the actions of the Taliban. Basic services include assistance for education, health, livelihoods support for families, and rural emergency relief including drought mitigation. With functioning basic service provision, the burden will be released from the new government in Kabul to simultaneously manage the compounding series of crises across Afghanistan.

Making life-saving aid conditional upon recognition of the new Afghan government, or on too many policy conditionalities, risks the suspension of aid flows and eroding the aid system in Afghanistan, which has a functioning structure in place. Afghanistan possesses a comprehensive aid system linking the national government ministries (health, education, agriculture, rural rehabilitation etc.) to the local provinces that remains intact even if government power changes hands. The structure is established by the state and the implementation is managed by non-state organisations and international agencies.

It is of utmost importance to maintain the system and its operations by keeping the body of the people who work in the aid system in stable employment and within Afghanistan. This can only be done by ensuring the continuation of the flow of aid funds to continue regular payment of aid professionals' salaries and project budgets. Fears that either the international community will cut off aid and their salaries or that they will lose their rights under the Taliban regime will lead to an exodus of Afghanistan's most significant force for future reform. There will be time to review the efficiency of the system in the future, but the urgency now is to reassure its trained employees of their protection and rights and keep their technical capabilities within Afghanistan.

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This policy briefing draws on years of cumulative experience of the Author in conducting research on Afghanistan in various capacities. For related reading see the op-eds listed below.

- ▶ Barakat, Sultan. 2021. Peace can Still be Achieved in Afghanistan. Al Jazeera English.
- ▶ Barakat, Sultan. 2021. Afghanistan: New US plan may erase progress made in Doha. Al Jazeera English.
- ▶ Barakt, Sultan. 2020. A Peace Deal Alone Cannot Solve Afghanistan's Myriad Problems. Al Jazeera English.
- ▶ Barakat, Sultan. 2020. Afghanistan's Peace Process is in Danger of Unravelling. Al Jazeera English.
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