



CENTER FOR CONFLICT AND
HUMANITARIAN STUDIES

Policy Briefing Paper

Governance Ecosystem and Institutions in Afghanistan post-2021: Dynamics, Capacities, and Challenges

December 2024



The Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies (CHS) is one of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies Programs. It was established in 2016. The Center focuses on producing in-depth research, building specialized capacities, and guiding policies aimed at promoting peace and resolving conflicts through diverse and multi-track dialogues. The Center aspires to become one of the leading research institutions in the Global South, dedicated to addressing issues of conflict and humanitarian response from a critical and forward-looking perspective.

Hameed Hakimi is a Senior Fellow at CHS. He leads the Afghanistan Research and Policy Initiative (ARPI). Hameed has over 15 years of experience in delivering high-impact interdisciplinary projects, leading strategic dialogues, and developing multidimensional research for complex contexts. Since 2013, his work on South Asia (particularly Afghanistan) has centred on the nexus between development, state-building, peace, violence, and security.

Hameed is also an Associate Fellow at Chatham House and a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council. At the University of Cambridge, his interdisciplinary doctoral research critically examines the reconceptualization of the notion of Security and its intersection with the securitisation of migration in Europe. Hameed obtained his MSc in International Security and Global Governance from Birkbeck College, University of London, his BA in Politics (with honours) from Queen Mary University of London, and his qualification in research methodologies from the University of Birmingham.



CENTER FOR CONFLICT AND
HUMANITARIAN STUDIES

Policy Briefing Paper

Governance Ecosystem and Institutions in Afghanistan post-2021: Dynamics, Capacities, and Challenges

Author: Hameed Hakimi

December 2024

This document has been produced by the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies (CHS)

Contents

Introduction	1
Theorising State and Governance in Afghanistan under the Taliban	2
Understanding Taliban's Theorising of State	3
Current Political Trajectory of Afghanistan	5
Transforming from Insurgency to Governing	6
Preserving Afghanistan's Institutions	7
The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and Preserving Institutions	8
Afghan Institutions and Aid Dependency	9
Resilience of Afghan Institutions	10
Conclusion and Recommendations	11
Actionable Policy Recommendations	12

Introduction

The focus of Western media and policymakers has shifted away from Afghanistan in stark contrast to the zenith of US-led military presence in the country after 2001. The current shift is in part due to the conflict in Ukraine that began soon after the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021. The war in Gaza—which Israel has now expanded into the region—also diverts much of the global and regional policy, humanitarian, and diplomatic efforts. However, as a conduit between Central Asia, South Asia, and West Asia, Afghanistan's role in regional stability should not be overlooked – as the country's history has demonstrated. Beyond the obvious significance of building and strengthening stability in Afghanistan to ensure ordinary Afghans have peace and dignity, the Afghanistan context offers potential for rich discussions on how global hegemonic powers' decisions – and interventions – have a lasting impact on countries and regions in the Global South.

As the Taliban completes three years at the helm of power, a labyrinth of challenges and interconnected complexities confronts the country and its population. Some of these challenges, such as weak infrastructure, low economic performance, climate change, forced outward migration, internal displacement, and governance issues, predate the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. They also include challenges beyond the capacity of the Taliban, or any single regime in power, to resolve alone. The legacy of the ensuing challenges outlined above – nonetheless – compounds the current policy, security, and international relations contexts in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, there is a consensus in the region around Afghanistan, and evidence of acceptance

internationally, that engagement with the Taliban is the only possible way forward to address humanitarian suffering in the country and prevent state collapse that would lead to a return to full-scale conflict in Afghanistan. Any scenario entailing a collapse of the state or a return to violent instability in Afghanistan would undoubtedly be detrimental to the security and humanitarian environment across the region. Yet, international actors, and Western donor states in particular, have not succeeded in initiating a tangible engagement process with the current Afghan authorities under the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA). The imminent inauguration of a new administration in Washington under president-elect Donald Trump adds a layer of unpredictability about the US policy toward Afghanistan. However, the indications are that dealing with the Taliban regime may not be the top item in the priorities' list of the incoming Trump administration.

So far, a key challenge in establishing sustainable engagement with the Taliban remains the problem of identifying – or carving – practical entry points for dialogue and discussion. This largely explains why, despite numerous efforts internationally, including by Afghans in the diaspora, not a single platform for sustainable dialogue has emerged that facilitates engagement with the Taliban. As a centralised movement, Taliban leaders and representatives also demonstrate an evident lack of inclination toward engagement with a large proportion of external actors and non-Taliban Afghan stakeholders. As a result, there has been no breakthrough in efforts to create a 'process' that is accepted by the Taliban and can be successfully managed to establish continued dialogue.

While there are signs of growing regional and international acknowledgement to engage with the Taliban not least on ensuring better coordination of humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan, there is little agreement on the best approach to achieve lasting engagement. In response to this ostensible vacuum and building on its continued efforts to strengthen peace in Afghanistan, the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies (CHS) recently launched a new workstream, the Afghanistan Research and Policy Initiative (ARPI). The findings in this paper draw from the substantial inaugural ARPI workshop organised by CHS in September 2024. The two-day workshop was held in Doha as an off-the-record and invite-only expert roundtable event. The workshop brought together experts, scholars, practitioners, representatives of the Afghan government, and international policy stakeholders for in-depth and interactive discussions. ARPI intends to generate actionable, solution-oriented, and practical policy options that support peace and stability for the Afghan people.

The current paper examines two specific themes explored extensively at the ARPI inaugural workshop. First, it explores the theorising of state and governance under the Taliban and the Taliban's vision for establishing a political trajectory out of the current interim administration. The current ambiguity regarding the political direction of Afghanistan is one of the contributing factors behind international reluctance inhibiting efforts to craft meaningful and long-term engagement with Afghanistan. Second, the paper analyses the challenges of preserving key civilian institutions in Afghanistan as they grapple with a plethora

of problems amidst socio-economic woes: a brain-drain, a new government and political actors taking the reins of power, and international sanctions. Without functioning institutions, no amount of aid or developmental assistance can guarantee a positive future for Afghanistan.

Building on the outcomes of the workshop discussions, the paper ends by offering concluding reflections and policy recommendations.

Theorising State and Governance in Afghanistan under the Taliban

In the context of modern state building, Afghanistan's post-19th century history illustrates how conflicts, wars, negotiations, and treaties involving the British, Russians, and Afghans have shaped its frontiers.¹ Difficulty in maintaining territorial control features as a constant challenge for almost all modern Afghan states. For instance, once the boundaries were drawn, 'some were respected and many persist [to this day], but... neither the British or Russian invaders nor the native Afghan governments that mediated between these empires and inherited the 'state' exercised complete control over [these boundaries]'.² This fact is often referenced by the Taliban leaders to domestic audiences when they emphasise their full territorial control as uniquely successful since the 1970s. In addition to the fluidity of borders historically, migratory movements defined the regions that modern Afghanistan connects as a conduit, resulting in strong people-to-people links and the exchange of cultures. This has been referred to as the

1 Dorronsoro, G. (2005) *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan - 1979 to the present* (Hurst and Company London). For a more detailed reference on Afghanistan's history before 1979 see: Dupree, L. (1980) *Afghanistan* (Princeton University Press)

2 Manchanda, N. (2017) *Rendering Afghanistan legible: Borders, frontiers and 'state' of Afghanistan*, *Politics*, Vol 37, Issue 4

longue durée of mobility³, or relying on mobility as survival and a way of life.⁴

The emergence of a modern Afghan 'nation state' emulating the features of the Western model began under Abdur Rahman Khan (1880 - 1901). He is credited with breaking the tradition of 'sultanism' by discontinuing the formerly entrenched tradition of appointing heirs to lead provincial governance. The change, in effect, limited the considerable autonomy enjoyed by the heirs, arguably running a decentralised provincial system, ultimately resulting in the centralisation of power at the throne. As an outcome, Abdur Rahman Khan managed to weaken the grip and influence of the tribes, the bedrock of loyalty for the earlier monarchs.⁵ However, the shift from sultanism toward building a nation state required new sources of legitimacy. This vacuum was primarily filled through reliance on Islam - and at times the ulema - as a bulwark of the 'nation'.⁶ Defending Islam, or the 'nation', has been used by rulers and heads of state as a rallying call for over a hundred years in Afghanistan.

Viewed from a historical vantage point, the Taliban's claim to defending Islam and the nation has precedence in modern Afghan history - though through varied approaches. This also somewhat explains the reluctance among Afghans to embrace any new interpretation of Shariah in governance matters; the population considers itself to be in full compliance

with an Islamic government system and a tradition of Islamic governance for generations.

Understanding Taliban's Theorising of State

Most of the analysis and perspective on the Taliban's vision for a state relies on how the Taliban ruled between 1996 and 2001. The current iteration of the Taliban's rule is often compared to the previous period. Hence, phrases like "Taliban 2.0"⁷ have entered the glossary of research and analytical terms on Afghanistan.

Experts at the workshop highlighted the difficulty of understanding the Taliban's conceptualisation of the state and governance model since such Taliban perspectives are not clearly articulated in their entirety. Taliban senior leadership, the supreme leader - the amir - in particular, issues edicts that become part of the legal and political framework. In effect, laws are dictated through a top-down model of political order that does not accommodate a consultative process open to the citizens. This is unlike the participatory models of governance, constitutional monarchies, or typically the liberal democratic models that purport to be consultative and open to scrutiny by the citizen.

In a sign of what seemed to be an attempt to address questions on the Taliban's governance model, the Islamic Emirate published a book by their Chief Justice,

3 Hakimi, H [co-authored] (2020) *The EU and the Politics of Migration Management in Afghanistan*, Research Paper, Chatham House - The Royal Institute of International Affairs

4 Recommended further reading on the topic: Marsden, M. (2016) *Trading Worlds: Afghan Merchants Across Modern Frontiers* (C Hurst & Co Publishers); Monsutti, A. (2012) *War and Migration: Social Networks and Economic Strategies of the Hazaras of Afghanistan* (Routledge)

5 Hakimi, H. (Sep 2021) 'Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations: the search for identity and the emergence of new nation states', in Baqai, H., and Wasi, N. (eds.) 'Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations: Pitfalls and the Way Forward', Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES)

6 Ibid

7 For instance, see: Wood, G. (Aug 2021) 'This Is Not the Taliban 2.0', The Atlantic

Abdul Hakim Haqqani, in April 2022⁸. The book, written entirely in Arabic, is titled: *Al-Emarat al-Islamiya wa Nizaamuha* (The Islamic Emirate and its System of Governance)⁹. The book is endorsed by the amir of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada. Yet, there is no evidence to suggest that the Islamic Emirate promoted the book as a 'constitution' or a guideline for political framework. Hence, experts and analysts widely view the publication to be a work on jurisprudence, as opposed to a categorical outlook on the Taliban's conception of a state and governance system. However, it provides key insights and, as a publication by the Taliban, stands out in its significance.

In the book, Haqqani articulates his vision and the underlying rationale for his arguments. He examines the legitimacy of an Islamic state, delineating the perceived political roles of Islamic scholars, the law-making body, and the judiciary, as well as the education system. He further discusses what he views as the appropriate status of women and the rationale that an Islamic state cannot be founded upon 'man-made laws'. Since the text is composed in Arabic, it arguably facilitates access for numerous scholars within the Islamic world. However, the fact that it is not written in Pashto or Dari simultaneously restricts accessibility for the Afghan population.¹⁰

Participants at the workshop discussed key aspects of the book, highlighting not only important insights but also challenges of aligning the author's claims to Islamic

jurisprudence - Fiqh - with the realities of political theory and modern statecraft. Haqqani's conception of a political system derives reference from classical sources such as the 11th-century Muslim polymath, al-Mawardi. Nonetheless, pre-modern works of Islamic scholarship do not contain conceptions of modern realities such as nation-states that must be defined by the demarcation of borders, often entailing manifestations of contemporary nationalisms. Further, critics of Haqqani's work have underscored that traditional Islamic jurisprudence does not deal with politics under the framework of a political theory, something that Haqqani's book claims; rather, Hadith and Fiqh scrutinise governance matters under the broader spectrum of 'duties' of Muslim rulers as individuals responsible for their acts.¹¹ Based on this traditional understanding of jurisprudence, theorising politics and the question of formulating political theory pertains to the prevalent realities in society that regularly shift, and must not be viewed as static realities conceived by the individual - or a small set of individuals.

Beyond the conceptual value of the points raised, the discussion illustrates the sheer difficulty that ambiguous conceptions of political theory and statecraft present practitioners, policymakers, and stakeholders who must make sense of the Taliban's theorising of state and governance. Early speculations that the Taliban leaders would be open to 'refashioning' the 2004 Afghan constitution

8 Bunzel, C. (Jul 2024) 'The Taliban's Political Theory: 'Abd al-Hakim al-Haqqani's Vision for the Islamic Emirate, Hudson Institute, <https://www.hudson.org/terrorism/talibans-political-theory-abd-al-hakim-al-haqqanis-vision-islamic-emirate-cole-bunzel>

9 <https://x.com/aslam44780242/status/1540568373251252224>

10 For a detailed analysis in English, see: Butt, J., (Aug 2023) 'A Taliban Theory of State: A review of the Chief Justice's book of jurisprudence', Afghanistan Analysts Network <https://shorturl.at/YAamK>

11 Ibid.

have proved unfounded.¹² There is no evidence yet of the Taliban's offering of a clear articulation of a vision for the state that allows a coherent understanding of the current system of governance in Afghanistan. Observing the political developments in Afghanistan, such as the issuance of edicts by the Taliban's amir, indicates that the current system of governance is highly centralised. The amir exercises absolute authority, notably through a top-down approach to law-making (including the remits of the social contract with the Afghan society), the appointments of senior officials, and driving a vision for Afghanistan's external relations. Nonetheless, it is unclear how the amir receives advice that influences his decisions. It is also difficult to understand what mechanisms are in place within the Taliban movement to hold the supreme leadership to account if there are matters of disagreement or, indeed, if the movement wanted a change of supreme leadership.

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan remains an interim system, appointed by the Taliban supreme leader in September 2021. Though the previous regime under the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan collapsed as the Taliban seized power in August 2021, the current Islamic Emirate's administrative and operational structures are almost entirely inherited from the Islamic Republic. Despite these apparent linkages, however, the Taliban's approach to politics and governance function is drastically different from the previous Afghan government. Universal and normatively accepted notions of human rights, women's role in society, modern education and curricula, international treaties and international financial agreements are some of the critical areas that the Taliban has not

harmonised with its conceptions of state, governance, and international relations. It is inconceivable that Afghanistan can attain its full potential as a prosperous society without sustainably harmonious state-society relations - a mission that does not seem sufficiently achieved so far.

Participants at the workshop acknowledged the need for greater engagement with the Taliban not only at the leadership level but also at the civil service and technocratic levels to facilitate exposure to professional practices and governmental norms outside Afghanistan - particularly in other Muslim-majority countries.

Current Political Trajectory of Afghanistan

Participants at the workshop explored the question of transitioning to a permanent administration - out of the current interim one - in Afghanistan under the Taliban. Experts pointed out the value of an interim administration for the Taliban as it offers leaders flexibility to deal with political and internal matters more comfortably. Codification of laws and structures of governance has been undertaken by the Taliban to some extent, but it is not yet completed. It seems that the Taliban leadership favours flexibility since it allows space for navigating mechanisms to deal with domestic and external policy-political issues. For instance, the continuation of an interim administration is regularly cited as the reason for the inability - or failure - of the government to address a number of ongoing issues both domestically and in the realm of Afghanistan's external relations such as the development of a comprehensive legal system, devising long-term national economic strategies,

¹² Lambardi, C. B., and March, A. F., (2022) 'Afghan Taliban Views on Legitimate Governance: Certainties, Ambiguities, and Areas for Compromise', United States Institute of Peace, February 2022

addressing the demand for inclusive education, and achieving the restoration of development assistance to Afghanistan.

Experts at the workshop anticipated that, akin to the 1990s, the Taliban will continue with the interim setup. At the same time, the codification process would ensue, involving reviewing laws and regulations inherited from the previous regime. The amir will also likely continue working closely with his inner circle of advisors who support the Taliban supreme leader's office on various issues and aspects of governance and the issuance of edicts to generate new laws in the country. There is no clear evidence whether the Taliban's reluctance to grow out of the current interim administration stems from a lack of conception of the state, or pragmatism to maintain absolute control while exercising some level of flexibility.

Transforming from Insurgency to Governing

Participants at the workshop representing the aid sector reflected on the different layers of bureaucracy under the current authorities and how organisations are often ill-equipped to deal with all entities representing - or working within - the Taliban government's administration. This requires international aid actors to operate in Afghanistan with a level of humility and appreciation for the current layers of complexity underpinning the operational environment. Taliban has ruled the country previously, followed by some experience of 'shadow governance'¹³ while fighting as

an insurgency before finally seizing power in August 2021.

Historical analysis of the Taliban points to their emergence in the 1990s out of the Mujahideen groups. The Taliban ruled a majority of Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001. In this regard, the Taliban movement is a resistance movement that came out of a resistance Mujahideen group. Experts at the workshop pointed out that while the Taliban fought an insurgency against the US-backed Afghan government, the Taliban movement should be viewed as a 'semi state' group returning to power in 2021 - as opposed to an entirely non-state actor. This also explains the reinstatement of the Islamic Emirate in 2021 in the mirror-image of its previous iteration in 1996 - most high-ranking current Taliban officials served in the same or similar posts before 2001.¹⁴

It is unclear how the Taliban government and overall leadership would develop a theory of the state beyond their current approach of continually refusing to adapt to external demands for inclusivity. Yet, the question of sustainability of the current status quo will likely remain a concern for the Taliban leaders who are open to moderation of Taliban policies on domestic and external issues.¹⁵ In the absence of any movement toward some level of accommodation of those who could critique the deficiency of governance, the Taliban risks alienating more segments of society. Furthermore, while maintaining the status quo ostensibly preserves the unity of rank and file by portraying a combative stance on certain issues, the same approach does not necessarily guarantee the satisfaction of

13 Rasmussen, S. E., (Aug 2021) 'How the Taliban Won Afghanistan: Years of Shadow Government, Steady Recruitment, Patience', The Wall Street Journal

14 International Crisis Group (Sep 2021) 'Who will run the Taliban government?', 09 September 2021

15 Goldbaum, C. (Oct 2024) 'Is Afghanistan's Most-Wanted Militant Now Its Best Hope for Change?', The New York Times, 24 October 2024

senior figures, particularly those who would be keen for a more pragmatic approach to politics, governance, and external relations. Crucially, as the intensity of the conflict has subsided substantially and security – defined as 'the absence of violence' – has increased, continued ambiguity regarding Afghanistan's political trajectory would inevitably risk resentment among the population who remember being failed by the previous regime under the gaze of a massive international donor apparatus.

Preserving Afghanistan's Institutions

Building state and public institutions in Afghanistan has been an arduous task for successive regimes in the country, shaped by modernisation, foreign intervention, civil war, and political instability. Participants at the workshop discussed the challenges facing institutions in Afghanistan and considered ways forward.

For over a century, attempts to establish state institutions have frequently been disrupted by conflict and ideological changes – often as a consequence of regime change. In the post-colonial sense, the contemporary history of institution building in Afghanistan is often traced to the reign of King Amanullah Khan, who successfully restored the country's independence from British rule in 1919. Widely accepted as a 'modernising' leader, Amanullah Khan wanted to reform Afghan society and create a strong central government. For instance, he introduced a 'de facto constitution in 1923', and

undertook related legal and administrative reforms to move power away from the clergy – the ulema – to a modern judiciary and the monarchy.¹⁶ Since 1979 following the Soviet invasion, Afghanistan's institutions have faced several episodes of extreme pressure due to regime change (e.g., 1979, 1992, 1996, 2001, 2021).

After 2001, the United States spent over US\$ 140 billion in Afghanistan to 'rebuild' the country and its institutions.¹⁷ Despite some success, American policymakers did not pay sufficient attention to the country's social, economic and political dynamics when implementing capacity building programmes.¹⁸ Decisions to impose Western technocratic approaches and methodologies on Afghan economic and civilian institutional frameworks – for example – were often a result of American officials lacking knowledge or comprehension of the cultural and social barriers that hindered support for the ordinary Afghan populace. In the absence of adequate contextual knowledge, US officials frequently empowered nefarious influential figures who exploited the local population or diverted foreign assistance from its intended beneficiaries, thereby enriching themselves and their affiliates. This insufficient understanding at the grassroots level led to projects that often exacerbated conflicts and the factors behind insecurity across the country, instead of alleviating them.¹⁹

There was a direct correlation between Afghanistan's reliance on foreign funding and the emergence of an Afghan

16 Chua A. (2014) 'The Promise and Failure of King Amanullah's Modernisation Program in Afghanistan', ANU Undergraduate Research Journal, Vol. 5, 2014.

17 SIGAR (Aug 2021) 'What we need to learn: Lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction', Lessons Learned Program, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR)

18 Ibid

19 Ibid

government that was less accountable to its own citizens and more responsive to the priorities of international donors – effectively enabling the donors to utilise aid as a leverage tool. This dynamic undermined the development of resilient institutions and governance structures that could function independently without donor support. The influx of massive amounts of aid money created opportunities for graft and embezzlement at multiple levels of government. Corruption became endemic, with funds being siphoned off by local officials, warlords, and international contractors. According to Transparency International, Afghanistan consistently ranked among the most corrupt countries in the world during the post-2001 period.²⁰ Among others, corruption hindered capacity-building efforts by diverting resources away from critical development projects.

Any discussion on ways to preserve capacity and institutions in Afghanistan must consider lessons learned from failures in – or incorrect approaches toward – building and preserving institutions in Afghanistan after 2001. 'One size fits all' approaches must be avoided by learning from the previous successful and failed experiences – and experiments – of building institutions in Afghanistan through capacity building programmes.

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and Preserving Institutions

Participants at the workshop representing the IEA perspective explained that the current government in Afghanistan has continued to employ civil servants from

the previous regime who currently work across various ministries and provincial governmental administrations. The IEA does not believe its policies are behind the 'brain drain' in the country. The increasing numbers of outward migrations from Afghanistan predate the current Taliban government.

The IEA has repaired and is actively using a number of computer software systems that will contribute to improvements in the taxation mechanism at the border crossings with Afghanistan's neighbours. Plans are in motion to devise a series of workshops for capacity building, particularly for those who are involved in the civilian sector. However, key challenges remain for the IEA to deliver on capacity building and preserving institutions. Lack of financial and other resources, such as appropriate training material – and trainers – suitable for the needs of Afghan civil servants and civilian institutions, is a significant hindrance.

Nevertheless, the IEA representatives at the workshop stated that the current Afghan government is in the final stages of devising a multi-year national economic strategy²¹, which will have a noticeable positive impact on aligning the priorities and mandates of international and Afghan institutions within Afghanistan. Furthermore, IEA is keen to increase trust between the population and the government by fighting corruption, enhancing education and training opportunities for the youth, and addressing any legacy issues of the previous Afghan government with negative impact on the population.

²⁰ Transparency International (current/undated) Corruption Perception Index: Afghanistan, accessed 10 October 2024

²¹ This is likely a 5-year strategy, but no final announcement has been made yet.

Afghan Institutions and Aid Dependency

As a landlocked, conflict-affected and low-income country, Afghanistan has a legacy of aid dependency spanning decades. However, this became more pronounced with the US-led foreign intervention in 2001. By 2020, approximately 75% of Afghanistan's public expenditure was funded by international donors.²² Building capacity and institutions in post-2001 Afghanistan aimed to strengthen the state's ability to provide public services, enforce laws, and ensure national security. The establishment of a functioning government was seen as crucial to Afghanistan's long-term stability. Foreign donors, including the United States, the European Union, and various international organisations, focused on training civil servants, improving public administration, creating legal frameworks, and rebuilding infrastructure.

Despite some progress and relative growth in institutional development, capacity-building efforts in Afghanistan were undermined by how aid was delivered and utilised. A significant portion of aid bypassed the Afghan government through 'off budget' channels, benefiting international contractors, non-governmental entities, and private companies. As a result, the Afghan government had little control over how aid was spent and had limited involvement in the planning and execution of key projects. This diminished the state's ability to develop its own capabilities and bureaucratic capacity, as government officials and institutions were often sidelined by international actors and donors. Furthermore, the aid that did reach the Afghan government was tied to donor priorities, which did not always align with

Afghanistan's long-term developmental needs.

Afghanistan's pattern of long-term aid dependency affects the sustainability of governmental institutions where aid is suspended. The impact could be both at the macro and micro levels, a compounded challenge. Experts at the workshop proposed several key issues. The current Afghan government will benefit if it considers building the following elements in the capacity-building processes and programmes for civilian institutions in Afghanistan:

- Human resources
- Financial resources
- Prioritising Afghans' needs over external demands
- Robust accountability mechanisms on all sides
- Insulating capacity building programmes from political interferences
- After devising national policy, the organisational process should be decoupled from political interventions

Regardless of the ideological and political leanings of those ruling the country, it is unlikely that Afghanistan could achieve financial self-reliance to deliver on the enormous task of maintaining, building, and strengthening national institutions without external support.

22 The World Bank (2020) Afghanistan: Public Expenditure Update, <https://shorturl.at/46D0J>

Resilience of Afghan Institutions

As a tangible and relevant example, participants at the workshop dedicated considerable time to discussing the resilience of the national health institutions in Afghanistan to zoom in on the critical necessity of ensuring resilience in the health sector. The resilience of national health organisations in Afghanistan continues to be tested heavily as they face challenges, yet signs of adaptation are emerging amid considerable political, economic, and social upheaval, especially since the Taliban regained power in 2021. The health sector, traditionally reliant on external aid and international support, encounters significant obstacles in sustaining essential services while responding to new health crises.

Notwithstanding the challenging operational environment, international organisations, including the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF, continue to work within Afghanistan. These agencies are actively providing emergency funding and facilitating the delivery of health services in imperative sectors, such as maternal and child healthcare, immunisations, and managing infectious diseases. Since the cessation of major conflict after the Taliban took power in 2021, access to rural areas has improved. As a result of international sanctions and the political implications for health interventions, there are uncertainties facing health sector actors – both national and international – in Afghanistan. Initiatives such as the Health Sector Transitional Strategy (HSTS)²³ have been launched to address the ongoing uncertainties; the HSTS proposes a 'common investment strategy that aims to minimise avoidable

morbidity and mortality by expanding the coverage and quality of health and nutrition services and strengthening health system resilience'.²⁴

The ongoing challenges facing the health sector are not dissimilar to those facing other sectors: funding issues, the brain drain among Afghan health professionals, politicisation of the sector, complicated bureaucracy, and insufficient capacity-building programmes. In addition, some specific challenges facing the health sector include: issues of quality of medicines, limitation on importation of medical products, and suspension of psycho-support programmes in certain regions such as Kandahar.

A shortage of female health professionals is of serious concern since the majority of the patients in public health facilities are women and children. Data sharing, investing in education and training programmes and collaborating with international actors to build capacity in the health sector were highlighted as some of the key areas of prioritisation for the current Afghan government.

Health experts and stakeholders representing international organisations at the workshop underlined the need for undertaking policy-related research on health issues.

23 Global Financing Facility (Sep 2023) 'Afghanistan Health Sector Transition Strategy 2023 - 2025'

24 Ibid

Conclusion and Recommendations

Afghanistan remains at a critical juncture in its contemporary history, with socioeconomic challenges, international sanctions, and other issues such as climate change and internal displacements hindering any attempts toward progress in the country. However, severe war fatigue among the population and a broader consensus internationally against the use of Afghan territory for proxy wars between other countries potentially offer the current Afghan government opportunities to work toward a broad-based and sustainable peace in the country. Recent Afghan history is a constant reminder that the rulers must capitalise on chances for peace.

Regardless of the theoretical conceptions of a state, ordinary Afghans are likely to afford legitimacy to any Afghan state that prioritises service delivery, socioeconomic security and a broad-based political system that is sustainable in the long-term. Nonetheless, ambiguity about transitioning from an interim to a permanent administration allows the Taliban leaders to weave consensus on issues and leadership styles that might cause friction. Maintaining an interim administration helps mitigate such risks even as it leads to confusion and uncertainty about the political direction of the country elsewhere among the population, and externally.

Afghanistan's history is rich. It offers various pertinent lessons to the current government and examples of governance that could meet the needs of populations more entrenched in traditional values. The Taliban needs to consider what successful decentralisation models it can adopt to ensure that populations across the country feel served by the state. As a country with a substantial youth population, it is

imperative that the current government pays attention urgently to the needs of the young people. Equally, for any state to function successfully, the system of governance cannot sideline the female population entirely.

Multiple changes of regimes - and continued conflict - in Afghanistan for almost half a century mean that institutions in the country never reached their optimum capacity and potential. Aid dependence has continually added to this challenge. However, in 2021, the Taliban inherited the institutions of a state that had received heavy investments for two decades. Despite the shortcomings, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan reinvigorated numerous institutions across the country, and trained professionals and a workforce to run them. The current government under the Taliban leadership should embrace the qualified and skilled personnel that are still in the country. Among others, this will build confidence in the population, dampen the push-factors for the ongoing 'brain drain' in the country, and open possibilities for turning a page on the effects of the regime change in 2021.

Participants at the workshop highlighted some of the key practical challenges for building and preserving capacity and institutions in Afghanistan, which include:

- Lack of resources and assistance, including Afghanistan's frozen assets, limitations and sanctions on the banking sector.
- Lack of food security and employment opportunities.
- Shortage of electricity, which is important to the automation process and supporting small/medium size industry by the private sector in particular.

Actionable Policy Recommendations

- No level of foreign assistance can replace the need for a sustainable economy, even in underdeveloped contexts such as Afghanistan. It is crucial to prioritise policies that provide the Afghan population with a route to overcome years of chronic reliance on aid. As a first step, a primary focus should be on restoring developmental initiatives.
- Ensuring service delivery with dignity is a significant step toward nurturing state legitimacy among ordinary Afghans. The Afghan government, international stakeholders, and I/NGOs must consider approaches to delivering services that do not diminish the dignity of ordinary Afghans.
- The current government should take steps to eliminate complicated bureaucracy and duplication of documentation that aid actors need to abide by. Duplication of processes and bureaucratic bottlenecks stifle efforts of I/NGOs to deliver vital humanitarian assistance in a timely fashion.
- In Afghanistan, technical aspects of governance must be de-coupled from theocratic tendencies that complicate everyday governance issues and statecraft. This will ensure efficiency and strengthen the technical capacity of the state institutions. Taliban leaders should be encouraged to capitalise on existing capacity in Afghanistan and ensure governance function is based on technocratic capacity.
- Without comprehensive educational and training packages, capacity building is highly unlikely. The current authorities need to adopt comprehensive training and education tracks for all segments of society to strengthen critical front-line services and key sectors such as health and education.
- To preserve Afghan institutions and build local capacity, donors must endeavour to develop programmes that eventually result in indigenous ownership. As recent history demonstrates, capacity-building initiatives are unlikely to succeed without a sense of Afghan ownership.
- With regard to a specific set of professional capacities, there is a significant need in Afghanistan for competent accountancy professionals. This presents a viable opportunity for Afghanistan's regional neighbours to offer scholarships and training to aspiring professionals keen to train as accountants.
- Generating credible, evidence-based research and analysis should be strengthened to undertake reliable needs assessment for institutional capacity building in various sectors. This should be prioritised along with encouraging data sharing by entities that already maintain such data.
- Ultimately, for external engagement in Afghanistan to be fruitful and beneficial to the Afghan population, all major actors - Western donor nations, regional countries, and the Taliban leadership - need to work towards fostering common ground that considers engagement as a sustainable 'process' rather than ad hoc transactional interactions.



CENTER FOR CONFLICT AND
HUMANITARIAN STUDIES

Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies
Al Tarfa Street, Al Daayan-Wadi Al Banaat
Doha, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha
Tel: +974 4035 6943
Email: chs@chs-doha.org

www.chs-doha.org

ISBN (print): 978-82-343-0217-6
ISBN (online): 978-82-343-0218-3

Cover image: A view of Kabul city from Koh-e-Aasmayee (Aasmayee Mountain) on 16 July 2024. The asphaltting of the roads and most of the construction in Kabul took place with international support after 2001.

Photo credit: Hameed Hakimi, private collection, copyright 2024