

## **The Afghanistan Dilemma: The Taliban Versus Urgent Need to Respond to the Humanitarian Crisis<sup>1</sup>**

by  
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One year has passed and the second year has begun since Afghanistan was handed over to the Taliban on 15 August 2021.

Afghanistan is on the brink of facing humanitarian catastrophe. It is also on the brink of economic collapse. The overwhelming majority of its population suffers from severe food insecurity and Afghan women are back to being repressed and disenfranchised after many years of enjoying active participation in the country's economy as well as its political system. Financially, the country's currency reserves, which were seized and frozen by the US in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover, are still being withheld for fear of empowering the Taliban regime. The US-proposed 'Afghan Fund', which places the seized funds in a Swiss trusteeship for gradual disbursement, circumvents Afghanistan's central bank and severely limits the Taliban government's ability to benefit from it.

Last year, when the Taliban seized control of the country, I was concerned about the misconceptions suggesting that there were "positive elements" in the Taliban's messages. In my column in T24 on 19 August 2021, I underscored that "Taliban is Taliban, let us not dream, let us determine our stance".<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, at the point reached today, I regret to observe that I was not wrong.

### **The Taliban should not be granted unconditional legitimacy**

The Taliban is a terrorist organisation that carries to the present day an understanding that should have remained in the darkness of the medieval times. It does not refrain from committing atrocities that people can hardly tolerate hearing about. Its rhetoric and actions leave no room for doubt as to its aims and methods. The Taliban's focus and organizational structure is that of extremist religious fundamentalism, not of governing.

<sup>1</sup> This is the extended version in English of the article in Turkish that was published in T24 on September 6, 2022: <https://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/erdogan-iscan/afganistan-ikilemi-taliban-ve-insani-krize-mudahale.36605>

<sup>2</sup> <https://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/erdogan-iscan/taliban-taliban-dir-hayal-kurmayalim-durusumuzu-belirleyelim.32152>

Having seized control of a country of geostrategic importance in the international system, the Taliban needs recognition and economic cooperation in order to survive.

The international community should build a cohesive position for solidarity and consistently emphasize that concrete steps to be taken by the Taliban government on fundamental rights and freedoms are the *sine qua non* precondition for any considerations of recognition and cooperation. The Taliban must assure that it will not generate and export terrorism, and that it will not terrorize its own people.

The Taliban should not be given legitimacy or credit until it demonstrates the will to make progress towards aligning with the international standards. It is imperative that progress is realized in practice. The reverse approach would cause irreparable damage to sustain the goals for global peace, security, stability and development.

If the Taliban fails to show the will to revisit its *raison d'être*, then Afghanistan and the world will have to search for a way to rid Afghanistan and the world of the Taliban. Accepting the Taliban as it stands would be a grave mistake, opening the door to further disasters.

Once the strategic target is agreed, priorities must be set fittingly. In addition to supporting the United Nations (UN) response to the humanitarian crisis, preventing discrimination and violence against women as well as ensuring the uninterrupted right to education for girls seem to be high priorities at this stage. This must be followed by monitoring of compliance with international conventions, to which Afghanistan is a party. The international community must maintain a robust solidarity.



*Afghan women defying the Taliban.*

## **Engaging with the Taliban is possible, but only with the right agenda**

The Taliban, which is *de facto* governing a UN Member State, can and should be engaged through appropriate channels, and it seems that such interactions are already under way. It is observed that contacts have been made through diplomacy and intelligence channels. Turkey is also conducting talks. We understand that the Turkish embassy in Kabul maintains contacts

with the regime. Lastly, the Taliban delegation that came (or was brought) to Ankara last month met with the Minister of Internal Affairs. These are news we follow through the media. There is no doubt that there are other channels we do not know about, and there is no harm in that. On the contrary, they should be regarded as opportunities to convey the right messages.



*A delegation of the Taliban meeting with the Turkish Minister of Internal Affairs in August 2022.*

## **The situation in Afghanistan after a year of the Taliban rule**

The following data has been compiled from various UN sources:

Afghanistan's economy was facing a convergence of crises even before the Taliban took power. The effects of a severe drought as well as the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic had increased poverty. The long-running conflict had left millions of Afghans internally displaced. The economy is now on the brink of collapse. Afghan assets are frozen in the West, in anticipation that the Taliban gets ready for constructive engagement with the international community. Under these circumstances, a further deepening of the humanitarian crisis seems inevitable.

Afghanistan is going through a severe humanitarian crisis. 95 per cent of the population is on the verge of starvation. Close to 19 million people face acute food insecurity. Nearly 6 million Afghans face emergency-level food security. Half of children under five and a quarter of pregnant and breastfeeding women need life-saving nutrition. WFP urgently needs 220 million USD a month to help people in need in Afghanistan. Many people will spend the cold winter months in makeshift shelters or crammed into unheated rooms, wondering how they will afford their next meal.

Children are exploited as cheap labour. Little girls are forced into marriage. 57 per cent of the girls get married before the age of 19.

The Taliban banned girls from secondary school. At least half of the girls cannot go to school. At least one third of girls suffer from mental depression, which continues to worsen. Unless conditions improve, it seems inevitable that the suffering from psychological despair will rise rapidly.

Women are deprived of all fundamental rights and freedoms. Discrimination and violence against women are reminiscent of medieval darkness. Women have to wear a burqa and can only work in certain jobs in limited spheres, subject to restrictive conditions. Apart from that, even leaving the house alone is a problem.

The health system, which had been desperate previously, has completely collapsed.

### **Local ownership is essential for building a stable societal structure**

The past year has made it clear that Western allies have failed to establish a sustainable legal system and public order in Afghanistan during their two decades of presence, and that corruption has wrecked the system. This example has reconfirmed that, without taking into account the relevant parameters that constitute the internal dynamics, it is impossible for the external dynamics alone to transform a society and generate a stable system without local ownership.

The heroic resistance of Afghan women in defence of their fundamental rights and freedoms against all odds, while risking their lives, is an example to be noted in history in terms of women's struggle for equality.

Peace, stability and development cannot possibly be achieved without the participation of women - half of society - in political, economic, social and cultural life.



*Afghan people are facing humanitarian catastrophe.*

### **Can the dilemma between the Taliban and the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan be overcome?**

The best option is to support UN humanitarian crisis response efforts. If the UN operations are adequately funded, concrete progress can be achieved rapidly on the ground. UN humanitarian mechanisms are appropriately equipped for this purpose. We know that the UN mechanisms with sophisticated capabilities and practical experience can function effectively, obviously to the extent of the support that Member States can provide.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)<sup>3</sup> on the question of the displaced; and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA)<sup>4</sup> as well as the World Food Programme (WFP)<sup>5</sup> on humanitarian crisis response, are working diligently at the global level.

Initiatives for bilateral humanitarian aid should be designed in such a way to be complementary to the UN's humanitarian operations. Such undertakings need to be planned and implemented prudently in order to avoid any perception or consequence to imply that avenues for premature recognition of the Taliban may be available. They should rather underscore the concrete steps to be expected of the Taliban. Comprehensive collaboration with the UN would ensure strategic consistency in this regard.



*Afghan girls must be provided with the right to education.*

### **Is Afghanistan the only example?**

There may be similar examples in various regions of the world. But currently, the Afghanistan dilemma is one of the most crucial one and it is of priority. If the situation in Afghanistan and other areas experiencing similar crises are not addressed without delay and with the right method, the repercussions may affect the global system and may not be easily reversible.

The world continues to deteriorate on multiple layers. Democracy is on the decline. Authoritarian populism is on the rise. Respect for human rights and social justice is eroding. The culture of consensus is being replaced by a culture of conflict. In 2022, we are witnessing war even in Europe, where democratic security is supposed to be relatively advanced. We are discussing the threshold for resorting to nuclear weapons. The refugee crisis is affecting all societies. The food crisis is causing serious concern. The energy crisis is ringing the alarm bells. We are already experiencing several consequences of the climate crisis.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/spotlight/2021/12/afghanistan-on-the-brink/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.unocha.org/afghanistan>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.wfp.org/emergencies/afghanistan-emergency>

If the approaching breakdown point is not averted, the crises could go on indefinitely and a catastrophic scenario for human society could become a reality.

**The Taliban reminds us of an elementary truth: Secularism is a main pillar of democracy**

The dilemma posed by the Taliban reminds us of the indispensable importance of secularism for peace, security, stability and development. Without secularism there can be no democracy; without democracy there can be no political stability, social peace, economic prosperity and international prestige. Secularism is a fundamental safeguard of democratic security.

Atatürk, the founder of the modern Republic of Turkey, had already explored this equation a hundred years ago.