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An Afghan woman spins wool in Bamyan Province. (Photo by UN Women/Sayed Habib Bidell)



RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN BRIEF

Section 2 of this quarterly report summarizes the key events of the reporting period.

Taliban Institute “Morality Law,” Restricting Women’s Remaining Rights

- In August, the Taliban instituted a new law policing the public and private lives of anyone living in Afghanistan, based on the regime’s extreme interpretation of Islamic law. Among the edict’s many provisions, women are forbidden from raising their voices, even in their homes if the sound can be heard by those outside, music is forbidden, and men are required to attend communal prayers.

Three Years of Draconian Rule by the Taliban

- This quarter marked over three years since the Taliban took power and three years since they instituted their nationwide ban on girls’ education, preventing girls and women from attending school beyond the sixth grade or higher education, with limited exceptions.

Four UN Member States Refer the Taliban to the International Court of Justice

- In response to the Taliban’s continued human rights abuses, especially toward women, Australia, Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands are referring the Taliban to the UN’s International Court of Justice for violating the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Moving to New Position

- On October 1, the U.S. Mission to Afghanistan announced that Special Representative Thomas West was transitioning to another role within the State Department. The vacancy will not be filled, but State said, “the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan remains an enduring priority.”

UN Reports Rise in Security Incidents

- The UN Secretary-General’s September 2024 report on Afghanistan said security-related incidents across the country had increased 53% between May 14 and July 31, compared to the same period in 2023. However, overall levels of violence remained low since the Taliban takeover.

Taliban Tighten Control of Non-Banking Sector

- Taliban authorities in Herat arrested at least 70 money service providers, who complained about the increased cost of exchange licenses and bank guarantees, in effort to tighten control of the non-banking sector.

Humanitarian Funding Gap Remains

- As of October 22, the UN’s 2024 Humanitarian Response Plan was 37% funded, with \$1.1 billion raised of the \$3.1 billion requested. The UN has failed to meet its funding targets for Afghanistan in each of the three years following the Taliban takeover in 2021.

Taliban Suspend Polio Vaccination Campaigns

- As of October 8, Afghanistan reported 22 polio cases in 2024, compared to 12 in 2023. Despite this, the Taliban announced in September that the group was suspending polio vaccination campaigns.

Cholera Increases with Flooding

- From January 1 to August 25, 2024, WHO reported 120,278 cases of cholera and 57 deaths, with nearly 50,000 cases from July and August alone, due in part to issues related to ongoing flooding. According to WHO, Afghanistan is reporting the most cases globally.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN



KEY ISSUES & EVENTS

In August, the Taliban announced a new “morality law” policing the public and private lives of anyone living in Afghanistan, based on the regime’s extreme interpretation of Islamic law.

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TALIBAN GOVERNANCE

Three Years of Taliban Rule Culminate in Draconian “Morality Law”

August 15, 2024, marked three years since the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan. In front of a crowd of 10,000 gathered at Bagram Airfield, deputy prime minister Maulvi Abdul Kabir boasted that the Taliban have “eliminated internal differences and expanded the scope of unity and cooperation in the country.”¹ Just days later, the group issued a new law, which the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) described as “a distressing vision for Afghanistan’s future, where moral inspectors have the discretionary powers to threaten and detain anyone based on broad and sometimes vague lists of infractions.”²

THE TALIBAN'S MORALITY LAW EXPLAINED

On August 21, the Taliban ministry of justice posted on its website a 114-page decree by the so-called emir, Haibatullah Akhundzada, containing 35 articles related to morality in Afghanistan.³ The edict, which regulates appearance, private conduct, social behavior, media and imagery, and religious observance, was released in Dari and Pashto, but SIGAR has independently translated the document and utilized an unofficial translation by Islamic scholar John Butt for the Afghanistan Analysts Network to evaluate the decree's contents.

The edict is built around the concepts of *ma'ruf* (virtue, every word and deed approved by Islamic law) and *munkar* (vice, every word and deed disapproved of by Islamic law). Under the law, the ministry for the propagation of virtue and prevention of vice (henceforth “the ministry”) is sanctioned with *ihtisab* (enforcement): promoting Islamic law and all virtuous acts that are in accordance with Islamic law and preventing any deviation from Islamic law.⁴ By endowing these powers to the ministry, people living in Afghanistan are separated into two categories:

- *Muhtasib* (enforcer): The person delegated by the supreme leader, or the commander of the faithful, to carry out the task of enforcing morality laws.
- *Muhtasib alaihi* (one who is being enforced): The person whom the enforcer requires virtuous conduct and avoidance of vice.

Under this system, the *muhtasib* has the power and duty to enact *ta'zir* (punishment, action taken in accordance with Islamic law when an act contradicts Islamic law).⁵

The first chapter of the decree (articles 9–15) characterizes the *muhtasib*, or enforcer, as bound by Islamic tenets, and as one who understands the benefit of asserting virtue, and is himself a manifestation of virtue. In his role, he must prohibit any wrong behavior he sees or hears, and prohibit any act of vice that has been witnessed and testified to by at least two persons. While performing his duties, he must “respect human dignity,” not cause further wrong acts, not act discriminatorily, explain the harm of vice to a perpetrator, admonish in a soft manner, and only use force when there is no fear

of any untoward incident taking place as a result of that force.⁶

The *muhtasib alaihi* or the one subject to law enforcement, can be confronted either for engaging in any wrongdoing or for avoiding obligatory virtuous behaviors, such as prayer. In order to be confronted, the wrongdoing must be evident and not require further investigation.⁷

The first section also notes that the *muhtasib* is responsible for ensuring that men and women are appropriately covered at all times. According to the law:⁸

- A woman is required to cover her entire body.
- A woman should cover her face.
- Women's voices should be concealed.
- A woman's clothes should not be thin, tight, or short.
- It is the woman's responsibility to hide her body and face from men who are not her close relatives.
- Muslim women must cover themselves in front of non-believing women.
- It is forbidden for unrelated men to look at a woman's body or face, and for women to look at the faces of unrelated men.
- If a woman leaves home because of some urgent need, she is required to hide her voice, face, and body.

These injunctions expand on prior Taliban edicts that suggest the best observance of hijab means women should stay at home. The new law goes further by classifying the sound of a woman's voice, if heard by a non-relative, to be a form of wrongdoing subject to law enforcement.⁹

Men are required to cover from waist to knees in loose clothing and adhere to previously issued edicts related to gender segregation.¹⁰

Section two (articles 16–23) describes the enforcer's duties. The *muhtasib* is required to ensure the population appropriately venerates Islam by performing certain actions and avoiding others. Under the surveillance of the ministry, Afghans must respect Islamic holy places and figures within Islam, including the Prophet and his companions; pray at the mosque at set times; pay religious taxes; and conduct their affairs in accordance with Hanafi jurisprudence, one of the four Sunni schools of

Islamic law. It is forbidden to cheat or perform other “un-Islamic” actions; buy or sell anything prohibited such as alcohol; use pictures of animate objects for advertising or other public use; sell parts of the human body; and for the media to publish reports that contradict Islamic law and religion, humiliate Muslims, or contain pictures of any animate object.¹¹ On October 14, the ministry confirmed the law bans all images of living beings in the media, and will be “implemented gradually” throughout Afghanistan.¹²

Article 22 specifies an additional 26 “wrongful acts” that the *muhtasib* is required to prevent, including (but not limited to): adultery, fornication, lesbianism, pedophilia, gambling, the sound of a woman’s voice emanating from a home, use or selling of narcotics or liquor, shaving one’s beard, not praying, styling hair in an “un-Islamic” manner, befriending or assisting non-Muslims, and disobeying one’s parents.¹³

Section three outlines the punishments the *muhtasib* is permitted to enact in a staged order. These include exhortation, reminding the person of “Allah’s displeasure,” threatening and punishing using strong words, fining, detaining the perpetrator for one to three days, or any punishment the enforcer considers appropriate, except in the case of crimes that are the exclusive prerogative of the courts.¹⁴ The seven cases in which the court handles punishment include: repeatedly omitting to say daily prayers; repeatedly omitting to join congregational prayers; a community collectively omitting the call to prayer; not fasting during the month of Ramadan; repeated disobedience to parents; repeated mistreatment of an orphan; or if a person does not perform all virtuous acts and avoid all iniquitous acts.¹⁵ In their entirety, the articles on punishment are phrased in an ambiguous manner that gives the individual enforcers extensive power to arbitrarily respond to individual situations.¹⁶

The remaining articles describe the duties of the ministry to consult with religious scholars and educate the public; and for individual inspectors to report to their supervisors, implement the laws as effectively as possible, and prevent the enemies of Islam from popularizing morally wrong behavior.¹⁷

The Taliban's new morality law expands on existing decrees to limit the human rights and fundamental freedoms of Afghans' public and private lives, and grants broad authority to Taliban inspectors tasked with enforcing them.¹⁸ The law also formally revokes the few freedoms left to women and appears to directly reject recent enticements from the international community to advance engagement in return for respecting international human rights standards.¹⁹

The international community has widely criticized the Taliban's new law. On September 18, at the 46th session of the United Nations in New York, UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women Sima Bahous underscored to the Security Council the threat of the law, citing the potential for a rise in maternal mortality of up to 50%, increased suicidality, and a destructive impact on Afghanistan's economy. Worse still, "Afghanistan's women do not only fear these oppressive laws, they also fear their capricious application," she said, adding, "A life lived in such circumstances is truly incomprehensible."²⁰ Bahous noted that how the international community responds to the decree, "is not just a test of who we are. It is being watched by political actors and armed groups in other countries and regions." Failure to protect principles of gender equality "may be felt for decades" if the world succumbs to rising misogyny.²¹

Afghan women in and out of Afghanistan have been protesting the morality law, especially its ban on women's voices, by posting videos of themselves singing online. In an interview with National Public Radio (NPR), Fatima Etimadi told the network, "Every day the Taliban seeks new ways to restrict women. They're making women die while they're alive." Etimadi posted her own video singing with fellow Afghan women. The law relies on the assumption that women's voices are alluring or immodest. Sahar Fetrat, an Afghan researcher with Human Rights Watch (HRW) told NPR, "This campaign [of singing videos] is a direct response to the horrifying objectification and sexualization of women by the Taliban, where they say women's voices equal their private parts. So [Afghan women] are saying you can't objectify my voice like that. It's not something like a private part of your body that you would cover. It's my voice, and it's important."²²

While the harshest restrictions target women, men are also affected. Afghan men interviewed by The Washington Post described their fear of being questioned and humiliated by ministry enforcers. Since the law went into effect, enforcers have begun knocking on the doors of men who haven't been attending mosque. In cases of repeated failure to pray in mosque, men can be sent to court and sentenced according to sharia law.²³ For crimes like adultery, punishment is up to the ministry enforcer and could include corporal punishment such as flogging or even death.²⁴ One man told the Post, "We are all practicing Muslims and know what is mandatory or not. But it's unacceptable to use force on us. Even people who supported the Taliban are trying to leave the country now."²⁵

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UN Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General Indrika Ratwatte visits UN-funded programs in Paktiya and Khost Provinces in August. (Photo by UNAMA/ Aashiqullah Mandozai)

According to reporting by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the new law's interpretation of Islamic law is intensifying intra-Taliban tensions. USIP suggested that Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada's visit to northern and western Afghanistan in September was an effort to address dissent among local officials. USIP also noted that conservative religious scholars in and out of Afghanistan have disagreed with the Taliban's recent interpretations of Islamic law. For example, the new edict directs women to conceal their voices, yet multiple Quranic verses document women's verbal communication with the Prophet. In response to the criticism, the Taliban issued a statement on September 20, barring religious scholars from engaging in debate on controversial topics.²⁶ The Taliban emphasized there were no internal disputes, and the ministry for the propagation of virtue and prevention of vice told TOLONews that USIP's reporting is "entirely false," and that the morality law is "an excellent law for reforming society."²⁷

USIP has been tracking each Taliban edict that has contributed to the erasure of women from Afghan society and the erosion of human rights since the group regained power in 2021.

Many of the edicts issued in the past three years are similar to those enforced during their 1996–2001 reign, despite promises the Taliban made prior to their 2021 takeover suggesting a willingness to moderate their earlier policies.²⁸

TIMELINE OF TALIBAN RESTRICTIONS 2021-2024

2021

AUG 30 Co-education banned and men prohibited from teaching girls.

SEP 8 Protests and slogans that aren't pre-approved by the Taliban banned.

SEP 8 Women banned from playing sports.

SEP 12 Girls banned from state secondary education.

SEP 17 The Ministry of Women's Affairs is replaced by the ministry for the propagation of virtue and prevention of vice.

NOV 22 Women banned from television dramas.

NOV 23 The Afghan Independent Bar Association stormed and suspended its activities.

DEC 26 Women banned from traveling more than 45 miles without a male guardian.

2022

MAR 2 Women banned from accessing health centers without a male guardian.

MAR 18 All foreign television series banned.

MAR 24 Women forbidden from working in offices.

2022 (continued)

MAR 27 Women banned from traveling abroad without a male guardian and without a valid reason.

APR 6 Women and men mandated to attend public places like parks on separate days.

APR 24 Universities ordered to enforce gender segregation.

MAY 5 Driver's licenses no longer issued to women.

MAY 7 Women banned from public transport without a male guardian. Women are told the best practice of hijab is to stay at home.

MAY 16 The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission dissolved.

AUG 23 Afghan female moral police department established.

AUG 29 Female university students ordered to cover their faces in classrooms.

OCT 7 Women banned from studying agriculture, mining, engineering, veterinary medicine, and journalism.

NOV 10 Women banned from parks and gyms.

NOV 14 *Qisas* and *hudud* punishments (specific punishments outlined in the Quran and hadith) reinstated in the legal code.

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2022 (continued)

DEC 20 Women banned from public and private universities.

DEC 22 Girls above grade six forbidden to attend private educational institutions.

DEC 24 Female staff banned from working for international NGOs.

2023

FEB 1 Women working in hospitals required to be fully covered, including a facial mask, at all times. Women medical staff must also be accompanied by a male guardian.

MAR 4 Thousands of divorces granted during the Islamic Republic invalidated.

MAR 30 Courts ordered to re-examine and invalidate legal cases settled during the Republic, if not compliant with sharia.

APR 4 The UN's female Afghan staff prevented from working.

MAY 11 Media outlets directed not to create content about women's hygiene issues.

JUN 8 Foreign NGOs banned from providing educational programs.

JUN 17 Women banned from participating in television and radio shows with men.

JUL 6 Beauty salons banned.

2023 (continued)

JUL 17 Attorney General's Office abolished.

NOV 11 NGO programs related to public awareness, women's health centers, social behavior, and mental health prohibited.

DEC 19 Letter issued to NGOs stating that the Taliban must approve new employees prior to hiring.

2024

FEB 28 Women appearing on television required to have their faces and bodies fully covered in black hijab, except for the eyes.

MAR 24 Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada states that public stoning of women will be enforced.

APR 24 Media outlets instructed to ban women journalists from appearing with men and stop reporting on women's rights or violence against women.

JUL 31 New morality law issued, empowering the ministry for the propagation of virtue and prevention of vice to police appearance, private conduct, media and imagery, religious observance, and social behavior of all people residing in Afghanistan, according to the Taliban's interpretation of sharia law. Women must conceal their faces, bodies, and voices in public, and are required to have a male guardian escort.

The State Department's 2001 human rights report on Afghanistan describes conditions that are virtually indistinguishable from those today:

The Taliban imposed strict and oppressive order by means of stiff punishments for crimes in the areas that they controlled. The Taliban's Islamic courts and religious policy, the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Suppression of Vice, enforced their ultraconservative interpretation of Islamic law. [They have] carried out punishments such as stoning to death, flogging, public executions for adultery, murder and homosexual activity, and amputations for theft. For lesser infractions, Taliban militiamen often judged accused offenders and meted out punishments, such as beatings, on the spot... the human rights situation for women was extremely poor. Violence against women remained a problem throughout the country. Women and girls were subjected to rape, kidnapping, and forced marriage. Taliban restrictions against women and girls remained widespread, institutionally sanctioned, and systematic.²⁹

A separate 2001 report from State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor described how Afghan women were barred from working, unable to go to school, given only rudimentary access to health care, and forced to adhere to a strict dress code. Women were only permitted to go out if accompanied by a male guardian. The Taliban banned white socks, makeup, nail polish, singing, and toys like dolls and stuffed animals.³⁰ Then, as now, the Taliban claimed these restrictions were for the safety and benefit of Afghan women, even though such laws violate international human rights standards.

Other Taliban Human Rights Abuses

This quarter, HRW issued a report detailing the Taliban's targeting of women who served with the police force under the former Republic. Some of the 24 women interviewed by HRW said they received "intimidating" phone calls from Taliban officials ordering them to report for questioning and threatening unspecified consequences due to their former work. As a result, many have fled to Iran and Pakistan. HRW also reported that a number of Afghan families have murdered their female family members who served as police due to shame associated with their work, and that the Taliban have failed to investigate these instances.³¹

Former government officials and members of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) have also been targeted by the Taliban since 2021. This quarter, UNAMA recorded four extrajudicial killings, nine arbitrary arrests and detentions, and six instances of torture and mistreatment of former ANDSF and government officials. UNAMA also recorded one extrajudicial killing and seven arbitrary arrests of individuals accused of affiliation with the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan, an armed anti-Taliban resistance group.³²

INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

U.S. Special Representative to Afghanistan Steps Down

On October 1, the U.S. Mission to Afghanistan announced that Special Representative Thomas West was transitioning to another role within the State Department. He was appointed in October 2021, shortly after the Taliban takeover, to lead the humanitarian effort and work to ensure Afghanistan did not become a terrorist haven. Ambassador West also advocated for the release of detained American citizens. Following the announcement, State underscored that “the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan remains an enduring priority,” however, the department said the vacancy will not be filled. Instead, U.S. engagement with Afghanistan will be led by Chargé d’Affaires of the U.S. Mission to Afghanistan Karen Decker (operating from Doha), Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights Rina Amiri, and Ambassador John Mark Pommersheim, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Central Asia.³³

UN Engagement with the Taliban

Path Forward on Afghanistan Unclear

The UN continues to face challenges in supporting the Afghan people given the Taliban’s unwillingness to comply with international human rights standards. In September, the UN Secretary-General wrote, “The way forward will be long and arduous. Success will require patience and a willingness to find step-for-step approaches, with the aim of building confidence over time. Human rights are a must and remain integral to this endeavor.”³⁴

Some UN officials have criticized the organization for yielding to the Taliban on gender issues. Under-Secretary-General Sima Bahous called on the Security Council to “stop normalizing discriminatory practices,” such as sending all-male delegations to meet with the Taliban, and asked the Council to ensure all decision-making forums on the future of Afghanistan address women’s rights and include the meaningful participation of women.³⁵

In a September briefing to the Security Council, UN Special Representative for Afghanistan Roza Otunbayeva expressed her concern that the opportunity to “address the many negative legacies of war” and improve the economy, infrastructure, and foreign relations in Afghanistan is being missed. As the Taliban exacerbate the humanitarian crisis through their policies, donors are increasingly unwilling to engage. Any hope for increased cooperation following the Taliban’s participation in the Doha III meeting in July has been undermined by the new morality law, Otunbayeva said. Yet Otunbayeva announced her commitment to continue moving forward with UNAMA’s mandate, including establishing working groups on various issues and maintaining all channels of engagement.³⁶



UN Special Representative Roza Otunbayeva briefs the Security Council in September. (Photo by UNAMA)

Four UN Member States to Refer Taliban to International Court of Justice

While the UN Security Council has taken no action in response to the Taliban's new edict, 27 member states issued a joint statement on September 26 condemning the Taliban's systematic human rights abuses, especially its gender-based discrimination, which violate the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).³⁷

Four of the signatories, Australia, Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands, initiated proceedings to refer the Taliban to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for these violations, marking the first instance of gender discrimination being referred to the court. The ICJ is the judicial branch of the UN, and settles legal disputes between countries. According to court proceedings, the Taliban will be given a chance to resolve the issue, and if they fail to do so, the ICJ will proceed with the case. The ICJ lacks an enforcement mechanism, but analysts have pointed out that a judgment against the Taliban would put political pressure on states who are considering normalizing relations with the regime.³⁸

Regional Engagement

Despite the Taliban's repressive rule, the group has continued to build relationships with countries in the region. According to a new report from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the Taliban have publicly announced 1,382 diplomatic meetings with at least 80 countries between August 2021 and February 2024, the majority of which occurred with regional counterparts. China has had the most diplomatic engagements with the Taliban at 215, followed by Turkey (194), Iran (169), Qatar (135), and Pakistan (118).³⁹ While the Taliban are not officially recognized by any country, they are making some diplomatic inroads. In September, the

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Taliban announced the re-opening of the Afghan embassy in Oman, and on August 22, the United Arab Emirates officially accepted the appointment of Taliban-member Badruddin Haqqani as ambassador. Previously, China credentialed a Taliban ambassador in December 2023.⁴⁰

This quarter, the Taliban had several high-level engagements with regional states. On October 4, Russia's foreign ministry announced that a decision "at the highest level" was made to remove the Taliban from its list of designated terrorist organizations, though it will not be official until all legal procedures are completed.⁴¹ The Russian foreign and justice ministries first submitted a proposal for Taliban de-listing to President Vladimir Putin in June.⁴² In July, Putin publicly said that Russia considered the Taliban an ally in the fight against terrorism.⁴³

The de-listing was reported by the Russian state news agency as Moscow convened its sixth round of discussions with regional countries on Afghanistan and related issues. Taliban foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi participated as the "chief guest," alongside representatives from China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. According to a Russian foreign ministry spokesperson, the closed-door meeting focused on intra-Afghan reconciliation.⁴⁴ Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov reportedly discussed the need to maintain "pragmatic dialogue" with the Taliban, and noted Moscow's intention to continue developing political, trade, and economic ties with Kabul.⁴⁵ Lavrov also met separately with Muttaqi to further discuss bilateral relations.⁴⁶

On August 17, Uzbekistan's prime minister, Abdulla Aripov, visited Kabul, the most senior foreign official to arrive since the Taliban takeover, to discuss bilateral trade.⁴⁷ Less than two weeks later, Taliban deputy prime minister for economic affairs Abdul Ghani Baradar attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the International Trade Center in Termez, Uzbekistan, where he again met with Prime Minister Aripov, as well as Azerbaijan's deputy prime minister, Shahin Mustafayev.⁴⁸ On August 22, Qatar's Chargé d'Affaires of its embassy in Kabul, Dr. Mirdef Alqashouti, met with the Taliban's acting interior minister in Kabul to discuss expanding bilateral relations.⁴⁹ From July 31 to August 1, Taliban representatives from five ministries joined climate talks hosted by Norway in Doha, Qatar, to discuss water resource management, access to climate funding, and international climate frameworks. The Taliban were reportedly seeking an invitation as the official representatives for Afghanistan to COP29, the UN Climate Conference, in November 2024 in Azerbaijan.⁵⁰

HUMANITARIAN CRISIS UPDATE

As of October 22, the UN's 2024 Humanitarian Response Plan was 37% funded, with \$1.1 billion raised of the \$3.1 billion requested.⁵¹ The UN has failed to meet its funding targets for Afghanistan in each of the three years following the Taliban takeover in 2021.⁵² The funding deficit coincides with "one of the world's largest and most complex humanitarian crises," affecting the 23.7 million Afghans dependent on humanitarian aid to meet their basic needs, according to the UN. In August, a consortium of NGOs warned that Afghanistan is at risk of "becoming a forgotten crisis" unless the international community commits to sustaining support and engagement.⁵³ However, the UN Secretary-General acknowledged in his most recent report on Afghanistan that, "insufficient compliance of the de facto authorities with the country's international obligations, particularly respect for the rights of women and girls, continue to pose challenges to resource mobilization efforts."⁵⁴

Heavy Rain and Floods Continue to Affect Vulnerable Afghans

Heavy rains and flooding continued to affect Afghans across Badakhshan, Baghlan, Kunar, Laghman, Nangarhar, and Nuristan Provinces this quarter. In September, local media reported three fatalities and 20 injuries from flooding in Kuz Kunar district in Nangarhar Province, with up to 150 homes destroyed.⁵⁵ In July, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) recorded 58 fatalities and 380 injuries resulting from the storms.⁵⁶ The most critical damage occurred in Nangarhar at the Omari refugee camp near the Torkham border crossing, the main transit point with Pakistan. UN OCHA estimated 550 refugee tents were destroyed, and noted severe damage to the water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities.⁵⁷ While humanitarian response efforts were deployed immediately, the country is still recovering from severe flooding in May when 11,200 families were affected across 13 provinces.⁵⁸

Food Insecurity Predicted to Remain High

The UN's World Food Programme (WFP) said in August that "catastrophe has been narrowly averted in Afghanistan" due to continued humanitarian assistance, but that improvements are marginal, with some 12.4 million people experiencing acute food insecurity.⁵⁹ Food insecurity is continuously compounded by intersecting crises. WFP has provided food assistance to 185,000 individuals affected by shock events in 2024, such as the recent flooding, and has provided cash assistance, high energy biscuits, and specialized nutritious food to over 370,000 returnees from Pakistan.⁶⁰

Global levels of food security are commonly classified using the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) system, which tracks the number of people affected by food insecurity and malnutrition as seen

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in R.1.⁶¹ Levels are determined by analyzing food availability, access, utilization (is there adequate storage and water), and stability (continued access to food). These areas are in turn impacted by existing vulnerabilities and shock events.⁶² In its latest analysis of Afghanistan from May 2024, the IPC identified 2.9 million Afghans experiencing emergency levels of acute food insecurity.⁶³

TABLE R.1

Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC)		
Food Insecurity Phase	Technical Description	Priority Response Objective
1 - None/Minimal	Households are able to meet essential food and non-food needs without engaging in atypical and unsustainable strategies to access food and income.	Resilience building and disaster risk reduction
2 - Stressed	Households have minimally adequate food consumption but are unable to afford some essential non-food expenditures without engaging in stress-coping strategies.	Disaster risk reduction and protection of livelihoods
3 - Crisis	Households either: · Have food consumption gaps that are reflected by high or above-usual acute malnutrition; OR · Are marginally able to meet minimum food needs, but only by depleting essential livelihood assets or through crisis-coping strategies.	URGENT ACTION REQUIRED to protect livelihoods and reduce food consumption gaps
4 - Emergency	Some households either: · Have large food consumption gaps which are reflected in very high acute malnutrition and excess mortality; OR · Are able to mitigate large food consumption gaps, but only by employing emergency livelihood strategies and asset liquidation.	URGENT ACTION REQUIRED to save lives and livelihoods
5 - Catastrophe/ Famine*	Households have an extreme lack of food and/or other basic needs even after full employment of coping strategies. Starvation, death, destitution, and extremely critical acute malnutrition levels are evident. (For Famine classification, area needs to have extreme critical levels of acute malnutrition and mortality.)	URGENT ACTION REQUIRED to avert/prevent widespread death and total collapse of livelihoods

* Some households can be in Catastrophe (IPC Phase 5) even if areas are not classified as Famine (IPC Phase 5). In order for an area to be classified Famine, at least 20% of households should be in IPC Phase 5. Source: FAO and WFP; Hunger Hotspots FAO-WFP early warnings on acute food insecurity – June to September 2022 Outlook, 6/6/2022, p. 7.

Taliban Interference in Humanitarian Operations

Dissolution of Community Development Councils

On May 22, the Taliban ministry of rural rehabilitation and development notified international organizations that, based on a verbal decree from the so-called emir, Haibatullah Akhundzada, the 13,000 Community Development Councils (CDCs) in Afghanistan were dissolved.⁶⁴ CDCs previously worked with local authorities to coordinate development planning, and facilitate community participation in development projects.⁶⁵ Now, humanitarian and development organizations must seek approval from the Taliban’s religious scholars “in selecting the work plan (project) in the region.”⁶⁶

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) told SIGAR this quarter that they are monitoring the impact of the dissolution, but have not yet experienced impacts on programming, noting “traditional decision-making and problem-solving entities, such as Shuras and Village

Councils, have [already become] largely unfunctional,” as local authorities prefer working with ulema councils of religious scholars.⁶⁷ The Afghanistan Analysts Network reported that the Taliban diminished and marginalized the CDCs, “in many cases, rendering them inactive,” even before the formal decree.⁶⁸

Additional Taliban Incidents of Interference

UN OCHA’s latest data from September cited 173 access incidents that impeded humanitarian operations, resulting in 83 project suspensions. Most incidents (98%) were perpetrated by the Taliban. Interference increased 31% compared to the previous month, and 66% compared to September 2023. OCHA also recorded violence against humanitarian personnel, resulting in the arrest and detention of nine staff and the forced closure of three facilities.⁶⁹

USAID/Afghanistan did not report any instances of the Taliban infiltrating implementing partner NGOs or creating NGOs to gain foreign financing.⁷⁰ State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) reported that delays signing MOUs continued to impact service delivery.⁷¹

Migration and Refugees

Afghanistan’s Returnee Crisis

According to the UN’s International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2.6 million Afghans have been displaced since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, driving humanitarian need in Afghanistan and the region. Another 6.3 million people are experiencing long-term displacement. In its 2024 Crisis Response Plan, IOM estimated that over \$451 million is required to provide life-saving services to displaced people this year, while another \$177 million is required to address the root causes of displacement.⁷² Many of the most vulnerable are returnees from Iran and Pakistan. According to IOM, returnees from Pakistan are the “primary focus” of humanitarian partners due to the high volume of returns since Pakistan’s government announced its intention to deport Afghan migrants in late 2023. However, IOM noted that returns from Iran are increasing, and a surge of deportations would strain resources in Afghanistan and call for an updated humanitarian response plan.⁷³

Returns from Pakistan

As of September 30, IOM reported that over 734,800 Afghans have returned to Afghanistan since Pakistan’s “Illegal Foreigners’ Repatriation Plan,” which aims to repatriate over a million foreigners residing in Pakistan without valid documents, went into effect on November 1, 2023.⁷⁴ UNHCR has provided protection, cash, and in-kind assistance to 111,700 returnees since September 2023.⁷⁵ UN OCHA has recorded 106,700 returns from Pakistan in 2024.⁷⁶ According to IOM, the main reasons for return include:

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police harassment, fear of deportation, lack of jobs, insecurity, and family reunification.⁷⁷

Since Pakistan's policy went into effect, the arrest and detention of Afghan migrants in Pakistan has increased dramatically, from 997 in 2022 to 30,667 in 2023. As of September 7, 2024, there have been 5,632 arrests and detentions, and of those, 5,400 were deported to Afghanistan.⁷⁸ For an in-depth look at Afghan migration to Pakistan, Pakistan's repatriation plan, and the related humanitarian crisis, see SIGAR's October 2023 *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*.⁷⁹

Iran's Deportations Continue to Rise

According to IOM, Iran hosts about 4.5 million refugees, the majority of whom come from Afghanistan. As poverty rates and inflation continue to rise in Iran due to sanctions, risks to the refugee population are increasing.⁸⁰ As of September, a total of 826,000 Afghans have returned from Iran this year, including 377,400 deported undocumented Afghans. Daily deportations averaged 2,074 from January to June 2024, a 22% increase compared to the same period in 2023.⁸¹ PRM told SIGAR that humanitarian partners have scaled up assistance at border reception and transit centers in Afghanistan. The immediate needs of the returnees include health care, psychological support, shelter, food, protection, and livelihoods assistance.⁸²

Resettlement Update

PRM reported that 12,634 refugees from Afghanistan have been admitted to the United States through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program in FY 2024, as of August 31.⁸³ Another 28,941 Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants have been resettled to the United States in FY 2024.⁸⁴

As of August 30, SIGAR has submitted 294 applications for Priority 1 (P1) and Priority 2 (P2) referral. Three individuals have had their applications for resettlement accepted; 58 cases have been rejected; and 233 cases are still in process. Afghans awaiting resettlement are currently located in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and a number of European countries.⁸⁵

PUBLIC HEALTH

The Taliban's new public health minister, Noor Jalal Jalali, attended the Polio Independent Monitoring Board meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, July 15–19.⁸⁶ Jalali met with World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and discussed Afghanistan's health situation, the need to ramp up efforts to end polio and address other outbreaks across the country, and the need for women to have equal access to education and employment.⁸⁷ Some observers online criticized the WHO for engaging in discussions with Jalali given the Taliban's oppressive restrictions on women that have severely



World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (left) and Taliban minister of public health Noor Jalal Jalali met in July to discuss the health situation in Afghanistan. (Photo by WHO/X)

impacted Afghanistan's health sector, their obstacles to polio vaccination campaigns, and their killing of polio vaccinators.⁸⁸ Jalali has no prior public health experience, but served as the Taliban's minister of interior from 1996 to 2001.⁸⁹

On August 6, members of the Health Strategic Thematic Working Group, co-lead by Canada, the World Bank, and WHO, and focused on basic human needs assistance, met virtually with Jalali and his advisors.⁹⁰ Jalali said his priorities include accountability and transparency, child and maternal mortality, hospital reforms, joint monitoring, and access to services. Jalali requested donor support to build health facilities and improve roads and noted that he has discussed increasing domestic funding for health with the Taliban's ministry of finance. Jalali said he recognized the value of female doctors and acknowledged the shortage of female health workers in some key specialties.⁹¹ When asked about Jalali's commitments to improving child and maternal mortality, education, and hospital reforms, USAID said it "has not yet seen any tangible actions" from him.⁹²

Epidemiological Update

Infectious Disease Outbreaks

As of October 5, WHO has recorded the following cumulative infectious disease outbreaks in Afghanistan this year:⁹³

- Measles: 52,539 cases, 237 deaths
- Acute watery diarrhea: 146,555 cases, 70 deaths
- Acute respiratory infections: 928,780 cases (as of July 30)
- COVID-19: 11,047 cases, 63 deaths
- Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever: 1,101 cases, 89 deaths
- Malaria: 64,674 cases, two deaths

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Measles cases in Afghanistan are higher in 2024 than the previous five years. Since the beginning of 2024, measles cases have been increasing, peaking at a weekly case rate of approximately 1,800 in June, versus 600 in 2023, and less than 200 in 2019. Since June 2024, cases have trended downward, with approximately 900 measles cases per week in September. In April–May 2024, 794,676 children aged 9–59 months were vaccinated in response to the growing measles outbreak.⁹⁴

Acute-watery diarrhea disease has been decreasing since the end of July, which the WHO said could be linked to the approaching end of summer season.⁹⁵ Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever (CCHF) cases have been decreasing since June. Since the beginning of 2024, WHO has conducted online awareness campaigns about CCHF as well as training and community awareness campaigns in Herat, Balkh, and Kandahar Provinces that focused on CCHF and other infectious diseases.⁹⁶ Malaria cases have been increasing since the end of July, peaking at about 3,900 positive cases weekly in September (compared to 2,500 cases weekly in July).⁹⁷

Polio Update

As of October 8, Afghanistan reported 22 confirmed cases of polio in 2024, 13 of which were reported since the end of July.⁹⁸ Additionally, there were 74 positive environmental samples (a key indicator to detect the presence of polio) so far this year.⁹⁹ Afghanistan and Pakistan are the two remaining countries where polio is endemic, meaning wild poliovirus is native and regularly occurs.¹⁰⁰ In 2023, there were a combined 12 confirmed wild poliovirus cases, with six cases reported in each country.¹⁰¹ Seasonal population movement and ongoing Afghan returnees from Pakistan increases the risk of spread.¹⁰²

On August 13, a WHO Polio International Health Regulations Emergency Committee meeting reported encouraging developments in Afghanistan's vaccination efforts. During the first half of 2024, Afghanistan implemented two nationwide and two sub-national vaccination campaigns. In June 2024, Afghanistan implemented a house-to-house campaign in southern Afghanistan—with the exception of Kandahar—for the first time in more than five years. Nationally, 95% children under the age of five were reportedly reached in the house-to-house strategy.¹⁰³

Taliban Suspend Polio Vaccinations

On September 16, however, the Taliban suspended polio vaccinations nationally without explanation.¹⁰⁴ *The Guardian* cited an anonymous health official who said that the suspension was due to security concerns that vaccination campaigns might reveal Taliban leaders' locations and concerns that female health care workers were involved in administering vaccines.¹⁰⁵ Earlier, in Kandahar, where Taliban leadership is based, only mosque-to-mosque and site-to-site vaccination campaigns were allowed despite that

method being less effective than house-to-house. As a result, the transmission of wild poliovirus recurred in Kandahar, putting at risk positive vaccination developments in Afghanistan's other regions.¹⁰⁶

According to Dr. Hamid Jafari, the WHO's director of polio eradication, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative is aware of Taliban policy discussions to shift to site-to-site vaccination over the house-to-house strategy in other parts of Afghanistan.¹⁰⁷ On September 17, the Taliban ministry of public health denied suspending or delaying the polio vaccination drive.¹⁰⁸ Prior to the vaccination suspension, the WHO said that setbacks in Afghanistan pose a risk to polio programs in Pakistan due to high population movement between the two countries.¹⁰⁹

Cholera Update

From January 1 to August 25, 2024, WHO reported 120,278 cases of cholera and 57 deaths, with nearly 50,000 cases from July and August alone.¹¹⁰ According to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and WHO, Afghanistan is reporting the most cases globally.¹¹¹

Heavy rain combined with Afghanistan's poor health system and a global cholera oral vaccine shortage has resulted in an uptick of cholera cases in Afghanistan.¹¹² Across all provinces, UN OCHA reported on July 17 that flooding resulted in an urgent need for safe shelter and Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) facilities to mitigate the spread of infectious disease.¹¹³

Women and Health Care

Midwifery Programs

Afghanistan has had for many years one of the worst records for maternal health in the world. As of 2020, under the Islamic Republic, Afghanistan had the 8th highest maternal mortality ratio (MMR) globally, with 620 deaths per 100,000 live births.¹¹⁴ MMR measures the number of maternal deaths during birth or within 42 days of giving birth and is used globally as an indicator of the quality of health systems.¹¹⁵ This was an improvement from an MMR of 1,346 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2000 under the last period of Taliban rule, but mothers continued to be at risk of poor health outcomes in Afghanistan.¹¹⁶

The Taliban's current restrictions on women's rights have further put mothers at risk. UN Women predicts that by 2026, the impact of leaving 1.1 million girls out of school and 100,000 women out of university will correlate to a 45% increase in early childbearing and a 50% increase in maternal mortality.¹¹⁷

On September 3, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) estimated that 20,000 women in Afghanistan give birth each month in "hard to reach" areas.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, the UN's Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported that just over

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A midwife works at her clinic in Bamyan Province. (Photo by UNFPA)

67% of births in Afghanistan are attended by a health professional.¹¹⁹ According to WHO, having a skilled health professional (nurse, midwife, doctor) attend a birth is a lifesaving intervention for women in developing countries.¹²⁰

Midwife training programs are one of the few remaining ways for Afghan women to work in health care and to address maternal health outcomes for other women. As of August, UNFPA operated 477 family health houses staffed with community midwives and mobile health teams across 32 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.¹²¹ UNICEF operates 2,500 health facilities and funds salaries for 27,000 health workers, including midwives.¹²²

In May 2021, there were over 34,000 graduated midwives across Afghanistan, and only 18% (6,376 women) were practicing midwifery, according to UNFPA.¹²³ As of September 2024, WHO reported that there about 8,000 active midwives working across the country. The number graduating midwives from ministry of public health institutes of health sciences-supported programs has been increasing since 2020, with around 8,500 graduates in 2023.¹²⁴

Despite midwifery training programs functioning across the country, the UN reported that there is still a midwife shortage and that “Afghanistan urgently needs an additional 18,000 to meet the demand for skilled birth attendance.”¹²⁵ Though the “output for midwives is high,” according to USAID, “the midwife shortage is a function of employment rather than production” due to issues like retention and quality.¹²⁶

Women's Mental Health

The Taliban's edicts restricting women's rights and autonomy have impacted women's mental health. A Journal of Public Health study published in June 2024 assessing female students who were banned from

pursuing education found that among 426 participants, 87.6% exhibited depression symptoms and 49.8% reported suicidal thoughts.¹²⁷

A UN Women report published on August 13, 2024, based on survey data from October 2023–April 2024 found:¹²⁸

- 18% of Afghan women surveyed had not met once with women outside their household.
- 64% indicate that they do not feel safe leaving their homes by themselves compared to 2% of men.
- 8% indicate knowing at least one woman or girl who has attempted suicide since August 2021.

According to the Afghanistan Protection Cluster, which helps coordinate protection interventions in emergencies and to respond to those affected by conflict and disasters, Afghanistan’s mental health services have limited financial resources and a shortage of personnel making it difficult to address mental health needs.¹²⁹ USAID reported that in November 2023, the Taliban ministry of health issued a letter banning specific health services and activities, including public health awareness campaigns, women-friendly health centers, social behavioral change, and mental health services. USAID reported that the extent to which restrictions are enforced by local authorities differs by province, and that programs have adjusted their approaches to ensure that “beneficiaries, especially women and vulnerable groups still have access to essential services.”¹³⁰

Some mental health services have managed to circumvent the shortage of providers. For example, an Al Jazeera documentary in August reported on Mehriya Qadiri, an Afghan female psychologist who has been allowed to work despite her education being cut short in the 2021 ban on women’s university education. Dr. Qadiri is allowed to treat male patients in a hospital setting but can only see female clients in private clinics.¹³¹

Additionally, humanitarian assistance organizations have utilized community and training interventions to address the shortage of mental health providers. In 2023, UNICEF trained almost 3,000 social workers, nearly half of whom were women and utilized community awareness campaigns to destigmatize mental health issues.¹³² A September 2024 WHO Health Emergencies Programme report on services provided in 2023, found that 380 doctors were trained to provide mental health services to patients and make referrals.¹³³

In 2023, WHO, in collaboration with the Taliban ministry of public health, UN agencies, and NGOs, developed psychological intervention manuals, established mental health wards in four provincial hospitals, and fully funded operational costs for the 100-bed National Mental Health Hospital in Kabul for the year.¹³⁴ In the same year, a total of 181,744 Afghans received mental health counseling through the WHO mental health and psychosocial service programs.¹³⁵ As of August 2024, the UN High Commissioner for

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Refugees supported 35,177 Afghan beneficiaries (47% of whom were women and girls) with mental health and psychosocial services, such as individual counseling and family-based psychosocial support.¹³⁶

Despite the need for these services, humanitarian assistance organizations face significant difficulties in reaching the Afghan people, particularly women. According to USAID, “the implementation of mental health programs remains challenging for Afghan women” since the enforcement of local provisions varies across provinces.¹³⁷ Furthermore, given Taliban-imposed gender segregation, the lack of female aid staff to visit women-headed households or speak with women has limited the provision of aid for women and children. Taliban interference and delays in aid distribution activities have obstructed the timeliness of implementing humanitarian programs.¹³⁸

In the face of hurdles to accessing mental health care, some Afghan women have found alternative methods to mitigate their lack of social support. According to an investigation by Al Jazeera, despite the Taliban banning beauty salons in July of 2023, some women continue to operate secret beauty salons in Kabul which function as one of the sole remaining female-only spaces that provide community for women. An interviewee working as a beautician expressed how beauty salons “provided food for her family and kept her from isolation” and said that her clientele “saved her from depression.”¹³⁹

EDUCATION

This quarter marked over three years since the Taliban instituted their nationwide ban on girls’ education, preventing girls and women from attending school beyond the sixth grade or higher education, with limited exceptions. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimated that nearly 2.5 million girls across Afghanistan, about 80% of school-aged girls, including girls who were not attending school before the Taliban takeover, have not been able to access education since September 2021. The UN Secretary-General reported, “Precise information on the number of girls over the age of 12 years studying in de facto authority-run madrassas, or the curriculum covered, remained unavailable given the decentralization and non-standardization of these institutions and the reluctance of the de facto authorities to share information.”¹⁴⁰

The UN has warned previously that the Taliban’s restriction of girls’ education remains their biggest obstacle to gaining international recognition as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan. Despite that, USAID said that “there is no indication from the Taliban that schools will reopen for girls above grade six.”¹⁴¹

Community-Based Education: Alternative learning centers for children who do not have access to public schools due to distance, security concerns, and the Taliban's restrictions on girls' education. CBEs primarily provide instruction from grades one through three, after which students can matriculate to the public school system, and are not intended to replace the public school system. CBEs were also used by the Afghan Ministry of Education to provide distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. CBEs have been largely managed and funded by international donors, including USAID and State. A June 2023 verbal Taliban directive ordered international NGOs to transfer education programs to its ministry of education, but USAID told SIGAR at the time it anticipated that the directive would have a limited effect on its bilateral education programs.

Source: SIGAR, Status of Education in Afghanistan: Taliban Policies Have Resulted in Restricted Access to Education and a Decline in Quality, SIGAR-24-01-IP October 2023, ii, pp. 2, 13.

Taliban Continue Limiting Curricula

This quarter, UNESCO said that university enrollment has dropped by 53% since 2021.¹⁴² In the meantime, the Taliban ministry of higher education began reviewing the curricula for certain subjects, such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, and education. They aim to replace the time spent on these subjects with more religious content.

Since the ban on girls' education, media outlets in Afghanistan have been broadcasting educational programs for girls above the sixth grade. However, the Taliban have now prohibited radio and television stations in Khost Province from doing so.¹⁴³ USAID said, "Media outlets [in Khost] are being forced to stop these broadcasts, significantly impacting their revenue and removing one of the last educational resources for girls."¹⁴⁴ Taliban acting minister of higher education Neda Mohammad Nadim—sanctioned by the European Union for serious human rights violations and abuses—added that he would not answer any questions about women and girls' education.¹⁴⁵

In addition to restricting curricula and discussion of girls' schooling, the Taliban have barred women teachers from instructing boys' courses. This quarter, UNESCO attributed overall enrollment declines to this teacher ban, which has also exacerbated the teacher shortage. In 2018, more than a third of teachers were female (around 81,200), according to UNESCO's 2021 *The right to education: What's at stake in Afghanistan* report.¹⁴⁶ One USAID-funded program reported that "Teacher motivation and preparedness have suffered with reduced support to the education sector, and uncoordinated investments in a rapidly expanding Community-Based Education (CBE) system have created a largely paralleled and unsustainable system."¹⁴⁷

SECURITY

Three years after the Taliban takeover, terror groups continued to operate from Afghanistan amid ongoing U.S., UN, and regional concerns that the country is once again becoming a terrorist haven, notwithstanding the Taliban's commitment in the 2020 Doha Agreement to fight terrorism. While the Taliban have moved against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria-Khorasan (ISIS-K) and other anti-Taliban groups, they remain tolerant of terror groups such as al Qaeda and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).¹⁴⁸ A UN sanctions monitoring team reported in July that Afghanistan "continues to be perceived as permissive of friendly territory by terrorist groups, which also aspire to project threats globally."¹⁴⁹ State said it "remains unclear whether the Taliban have the will and capability to fully eliminate terrorist safe havens or control the flow of foreign terrorist fighters in and through Afghanistan."¹⁵⁰

Since August 2021, overall levels of violence in Afghanistan have declined, as the Taliban are no longer fighting the former Afghan

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government and coalition forces.¹⁵¹ However, the UN Secretary General's September 2024 report on Afghanistan indicated that security-related incidents (land disputes, armed clashes, and improvised explosive devices detonations) across the country had increased 53% between May 14 and July 31, compared to the same period in 2023.¹⁵²

Al Qaeda

Earlier this year, the United States assessed that while “al Qaeda has reached an operational nadir in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” the Taliban remain tolerant of al Qaeda and permit the group to maintain safe haven in Afghanistan.¹⁵³ In January, a UN sanctions monitoring team reported that al Qaeda's general command has about a dozen senior leaders in Afghanistan, while another UN sanctions monitoring team said in July that “al-Qaida remains strategically patient, cooperating with other terrorist groups in Afghanistan and prioritizing its ongoing relationship with the Taliban.”¹⁵⁴

UN Assesses Al Qaeda

A July 2024 UN sanctions monitoring team reported that al Qaeda members continue to benefit from freedom of movement throughout Afghanistan, even though “the Taliban have substantially constrained the activities” of the group. The report stated that affiliates have been traveling to al Qaeda's various training camps and supporting reorganizational efforts, which are “indicative of the group's longer-term intent.”¹⁵⁵ In January, they reported that al Qaeda maintains at least eight training camps in Ghazni, Laghman, Parwan, and Uruzgan Provinces, five madrassas in Laghman, Kunar, Nangarhar, Nuristan, and Parwan Provinces, safe houses in Herat, Farah, Helmand, and Kabul Provinces, and a weapons depository in the Panjshir Valley.¹⁵⁶ Al Qaeda provides TTP with Afghan fighters and training camps, which led the UN sanctions monitoring team to warn that, “greater collaboration among Al-Qaida affiliates and TTP could transform the latter into an ‘extra-regional threat.’”¹⁵⁷

Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan

The Afghan Taliban support Tehreek-e Taliban or TTP (the so-called “Pakistani Taliban”), which has a UN-estimated 6,000–6,500 fighters mostly based in eastern Afghanistan and aims to gain territorial control of north-western Pakistan.¹⁵⁸

TTP Attacks

From July 1 to October 11, the TTP claimed 173 attacks against Pakistani forces and civilians, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project, a nongovernmental organization, compared to 119 last quarter.¹⁵⁹ A UN sanctions monitoring team in July reported, “With Taliban acquiescence, and at times support, TTP has intensified attacks

inside Pakistan.”¹⁶⁰ The increased TTP and affiliate attacks, including one on a diplomatic convoy in September, has further strained the Taliban-Pakistan relationship. Pakistan maintains that the TTP operates out of Afghanistan and receives Taliban support, while the Taliban claim no terror group operates on Afghan soil.¹⁶¹

The UN Secretary-General said that TTP fighters were killed in Kunar, Paktika, Kabul, and Khost Provinces during the reporting period, while Taliban and Pakistani forces clashed at least 13 times with both sides claiming multiple casualties.¹⁶²

ISIS-K

A UN sanctions monitoring team reported in July that the threat posed by ISIS-K has “grown,” citing attacks outside of Afghanistan, an increased threat level in Europe, and an “enhanced propaganda effort to heighten public perceptions of threat.” ISIS-K does not threaten Taliban rule, nor has territorial control in Afghanistan. The UN sanctions monitoring team assessed that ISIS-K will “preserve battle readiness, increase revenue generation, and enhance recruitment” in the short term, while attempting to gain territorial control.¹⁶³

ISIS-K Plots on Taylor Swift Concerts Foiled

A July UN sanctions monitoring team report said, “Despite several [ISIS-K] cells being dismantled in Europe, logistical and financial support remain available to operatives arriving from Afghanistan and Central Asia.” The same team added that ISIS-K continued to rely on networks in Afghanistan and Turkey to move operatives from Afghanistan and Central Asia toward Europe.¹⁶⁴ In August, Austrian authorities announced that they foiled ISIS-K members’ plan to attack several of pop star Taylor Swift’s concerts in Vienna. ABC News reported that the United States shared intelligence with the Austrian authorities about the potential attacks, including that at least one of the attackers had pledged allegiance to ISIS-K.¹⁶⁵ These planned operations follow ISIS-K’s expressed intent to attack large events and its March 2024 attack in Moscow which killed over 140 people.¹⁶⁶

A July UN sanctions monitoring team reported that “ISIL core structures have used ever-improving media capabilities to derive propaganda value from their attacks, seeking to recruit support and provide direction to potential lone actors.”¹⁶⁷ On October 8, FBI Director Christopher Wray announced that an Afghan national living in Oklahoma City, “allegedly conspired to commit a violent attack, on Election Day,” on behalf of the Islamic State. The man had entered the United States in 2021 and was reportedly active in pro-ISIS-K Telegram groups after arrival.¹⁶⁸

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ISIS-K in Afghanistan

With regard to ISIS-K, the Taliban remained intent in “meeting what they perceive as an existential threat, [but] their counter-terrorism capabilities are deficient to meet the nature of the threat,” said a July UN sanctions monitoring team report.¹⁶⁹ This quarter, ISIS-K claimed 14 attacks across Afghanistan and Pakistan, including several in Kabul, according to ACLED.¹⁷⁰ ISIS-K’s Telegram channel said one attack in Kabul was in retaliation for the Taliban’s use of Bagram Airfield for detentions. ISIS-K claimed another attack on September 12 on the Taliban’s so-called “high directorate of supervision and prosecution of decrees and edicts,” which replaced the former Afghan government’s attorney-general’s office.¹⁷¹ Despite continued, low-level attacks across the country, the Taliban maintained that ISIS-K’s “presence has been reduced to zero.”¹⁷²

Taliban Security Forces

The Taliban ministry of defense claimed that 5,432 individuals joined the army this quarter, bringing their total reported, but unverified strength to 183,322. The ministry of defense also said three pilots joined the Taliban air force, bring their total air force strength to 67. Additionally, the ministry of interior reported that 1,234 individuals completed police training across the country this quarter, bringing the total Taliban-reported police strength to 212,258, as seen in Table R.2.¹⁷³ SIGAR cannot independently verify the Taliban’s data, nor can State. DOD said it does not track **Order of Battle** information for the Taliban regime in the same way it did for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).¹⁷⁴

While the Taliban continue to publicize their recruitment numbers, security analysts Riccardo Valle, director of research for The Khorasan Diary, and Lucas Webber, co-founder of Militant Wire and research fellow at the Soufan Center, warned that Taliban fighters are likely “stuck, bored, [and] doing administrative jobs,” leaving them susceptible to ISIS-K recruitment.¹⁷⁵

Order of Battle: The identification, strength, command structure, and disposition of the personnel, units, and equipment of any military force.

Source: DOD Dictionary, <https://jdeis.js.mil/jdeis/index.jsp?query=Order%20of%20Battle&pinde=4&doit=Search#>, accessed 10/10/2024.

TABLE R.2

TALIBAN SECURITY FORCES AND FORMER AFGHAN NATIONAL DEFENSE AND SECURITY FORCES STRENGTH				
	Ministry of Defense	Ministry of Interior	Total	As Of
Taliban	183,389	212,258	395,647	10/15/2024
Afghan National Defense and Security Forces	182,071	118,628	300,699	4/29/2021

Source: SIGAR analysis of Taliban ministry of defense X posts, 10/15/2024; SIGAR analysis of Taliban ministry of interior X posts, 10/15/2024; SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 10/30/2021, p. 82.

Armed Opposition Groups

This quarter, armed opposition groups, including the Afghanistan Freedom Front and the National Resistance Front, claimed responsibility for 116 attacks against Taliban security forces, compared to 68 last quarter, according to ACLED.¹⁷⁶ The UN Secretary-General's September report on Afghanistan said that armed opposition groups "continued to pose no significant challenge to the Taliban's hold on territorial control."¹⁷⁷ State has previously affirmed that it does not endorse violence in Afghanistan.¹⁷⁸

ECONOMY

Afghanistan's economy remains weak, reflecting a decline in growth and international aid, but showed some signs of stabilization. The World Bank reported that since August 2023, "the economic free fall has halted, with clear signs of stabilization and some recovery." It added that banking operations have partially resumed and more business and household welfare have shown improvements. Despite these gains, the World Bank said the Afghan economy remains "highly uncertain," due to persistent high poverty and food insecurity, and restrictions on women's participation.¹⁷⁹

Economic Indicators

Downward Pressure on Prices

Headline inflation fell to -6.7% in August 2024, compared to -7.5% in April, which was largely driven by falling food and non-food prices, despite supply improvements and trade disruptions. **Core inflation**, aside from volatile food and energy prices, declined to -1.4% year-on-year, "indicating that demand is still not keeping up with supply," according to the September 2024 World Bank Economic Monitor.¹⁸⁰

Headline inflation: "a measure of inflation that is based on an unadjusted price index."

Core inflation: "a measure of inflation that excludes items having volatile prices (such as fuel and food) from the price index being used."

Source: Merriam Webster Dictionary, definition for "Headline Inflation," accessed on 7/1/2024, at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/headline%20inflation>; Merriam Webster Dictionary, definition for "Core Inflation," accessed on 7/1/2024, at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/core%20inflation>.

Banking and Non-Banking Update

The UN Secretary-General's September Afghanistan report noted that the "banking sector's ability to play an effective financial intermediation role in the economy remains severely constrained," despite the Taliban's efforts to strengthen Afghan banks, regulate money markets, and Islamic financing tools.¹⁸¹ In August, Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB), Afghanistan's central bank, reportedly increased withdrawal limits from commercial banks from 70,000 afghani (\$992) to 150,000 afghani (\$2,125), with a monthly withdrawal limit of 500,000 afghani (\$7,084).¹⁸²

State said that the Taliban are looking to regulate and consolidate the informal, non-banking financial sector, which 90% of Afghans use, by enforcing existing regulations and increasing certain requirements.¹⁸³ The Taliban have said that money service providers (MSP) who violate these regulatory measures will be imprisoned.¹⁸⁴ State said it was not aware of

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DAB revoking any MSP licenses in 2023 and 2024.¹⁸⁵ In September, Taliban authorities in Herat arrested at least 70 MSPs who gathered outside the governor's office to complain of the increased cost of exchange licenses and bank guarantees.¹⁸⁶ State reporting indicated that the Taliban aim to disrupt financial flows to terrorists and opposition groups by regulating the non-banking financial sector.¹⁸⁷

Afghani Remains Stable

As of September 30, the afghani remained stable, trading at 69.2 per U.S. dollar. Since August 2021, the afghani has appreciated by 25.7% against the U.S. dollar. The World Bank said that the exchange rate's stability suggested a "balanced foreign exchange market, likely supported by increased remittances and cash shipments," in addition to controls on foreign currency. Afghanistan's central bank has held regular foreign exchange auctions, which the World Bank said helped maintain the exchange rate's stability.¹⁸⁸

Economic Development

Taliban Limit Women's Economic Participation

Since 2021, the Afghan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry reported that there were at least 50,000 women-owned businesses in Afghanistan, and the ministry of commerce and industry claimed they issued 8,000 to 10,000 business licenses for women (State is unable to verify the Taliban's claim).¹⁸⁹ However, the Taliban's recent so-called morality law, in addition to existing restrictions, is "expected to decrease women's participation in the economy," said State.¹⁹⁰ Even before the morality law, the Taliban cut the monthly salaries of women working in the public sector by nearly 75%, to 5,000 afghani (\$70), further limiting their ability to support their households and participate in the economy.¹⁹¹

Regional Economic Activity

This quarter, the Taliban continued to emphasize large infrastructure projects, reportedly funded by domestic revenue or private-public partnerships, to support economic growth and prove that they are self-sufficient.¹⁹² In August, the Taliban signed an economic cooperation agreement with Turkmenistan to support the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan power transmission and railway construction. The Taliban also held several trade meetings with the governments of Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Iran that focused on Afghanistan's extractive sector, but no agreements were reached. The Taliban continued to export precious stones and minerals, with shipments reportedly going to China and Pakistan, likely providing the Taliban with some revenue.¹⁹³

The World Bank reported that Afghanistan's trade deficit grew by 39% from January to August 2024, to \$5.6 billion (28% of annual GDP), compared

to \$4.0 billion (23% of GDP) in the same period in 2023. As of September, Afghanistan's exports fell to \$920.5 million (a 14% decline compared to the same period in 2023). The World Bank attributed these changes to Pakistan's trade policies with Afghanistan, which included higher tariffs on agricultural exports, a change to local coal, and the withdrawal of customs duty on fresh and dry fruit.¹⁹⁴

Afghan Fund Update

This quarter, the Afghan Fund's Board of Trustees renewed its Board members' mandates to serve for an additional two years, until September 2026. The Fund did not issue any additional updates this quarter. At the end of June, Afghan Fund assets reached \$3.84 billion.¹⁹⁵

To date, the Afghan Fund has not yet made any disbursements to entities on behalf of Afghanistan.¹⁹⁶ In June, the Afghan Fund's board agreed to pay Afghanistan's outstanding arrears to the Asian Development Bank, one year after the board agreed in principle that the Fund's assets could be used to clear Afghanistan's arrears with multilateral development banks and thereby elicit the banks' assistance "to stabilize the financial situation and sustain macroeconomic stability in Afghanistan."¹⁹⁷

COUNTERNARCOTICS

Narcotics Ban Update

More than two years after the Taliban's 2022 narcotics ban, poppy cultivation levels are expected to remain historically low, though opium continues to be grown, cultivated, and sold in some areas. State said the Taliban continued to face challenges when "attempting to enforce their nationwide ban on narcotics, including: severe economic effects; the presence of opium stockpiles; the continued sale and trafficking of banned narcotics; farmer resistance to the ban in certain areas; a lack of Taliban-provided alternative livelihoods support to poppy farmers; and concerns over the ban's sustainability."¹⁹⁸ This quarter, southwest Afghanistan continued to be the most active region in methamphetamine production, and methamphetamine trafficking patterns remain the same (from Kang and Zaranj in Nimroz Province into Iran, and from Baramcha in Helmand Province into Pakistan).¹⁹⁹

Opium prices continued to fall this quarter, at \$580 per kilogram compared to over \$1,000 per kilogram in December 2023, largely due to continued cultivation in Afghanistan, opium stockpiles, and reports of increased cultivation in Pakistan.²⁰⁰ However, opium prices remained higher than they were in the months preceding the April 2022 ban.²⁰¹

David Mansfield, a counternarcotics expert, wrote in a journal article that the opium stockpiles in Afghanistan have not yet led to a heroin

shortage and subsequent influx of synthetic opioids in Europe, which many anticipated would happen in response to the Taliban's opium ban.²⁰²

The UN Secretary-General's Afghanistan report in September stressed that "alternative livelihoods and prevention and treatment for drug use disorders remain inadequately addressed due to the continued limited resource allocations."²⁰³

Taliban Seizures

This quarter, from July 1, 2024, to August 29, 2024, the Taliban seized at least 3,384.67 kilograms (kg) of opium; 17.39 kg of heroin; 5.10 kg of Tablet K pills (a synthetic opioid/meth tablet); and 434.74 kg of hashish, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). UNODC also reported that the Taliban seized over 4,220 kg of unspecified narcotics and over 3,000 kg of unspecified narcotics and precursor chemicals.²⁰⁴ Mansfield added that "since May 2024, there has been a dramatic increase in the monthly volume of opium seized," resulting in increased transport costs inside Afghanistan and smuggling costs.²⁰⁵

The UNODC Drugs Monitoring Platform reported in September that methamphetamine seizure patterns suggested an "ongoing increase in trafficking beyond April 2022... in terms of frequency and volume of methamphetamine shipments."²⁰⁶ UNODC reported that from July 1 to August 29, 2024, the Taliban seized at least 2,918 kg of methamphetamine, compared to 334.14 kg last quarter. UNODC also reported that the Taliban seized at least 11,000 kg of ephedra (the precursor of methamphetamine) in the same period, compared to 22,504 kg last quarter.²⁰⁷

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سر دفتر مفتش ویژه برای بازسازی افغانستان



اداره

مفتش

ویژه برای بازسازی افغانستان

اداره

“This repressive control over half the population in the country is unparalleled in today’s world. It is a fundamental rupture of the social contract. It’s outrageous and amounts to systematic gender persecution.”

—*UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
Volker Turk*