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Humanitarian Action at the Frontlines: Field Analysis Series

Fragile Future:
The human cost of conflict in Afghanistan

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About the Humanitarian Action at the Frontlines: Field Analysis Series

The *Humanitarian Action at the Frontlines: Field Analysis Series* is an initiative of the Advanced Training Program on Humanitarian Action (ATHA) at the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative. It aims to respond to the demand across the humanitarian sector for critical context analysis, dedicated case studies, and sharing of practice in humanitarian negotiation. This series is oriented toward generating an evidence base of professional approaches and reflections on current dilemmas in this area. Our field analysts and researchers engage in field interviews across sectors at the country-level and inter-agency dialogue at the regional level, providing comprehensive and analytical content to support the capacity of humanitarian professionals in overcoming critical challenges of humanitarian negotiation and access in relevant frontline contexts.

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List of Acronyms

AAN: Afghanistan Analysts Network
ANA: Afghan National Army
ANDSF: Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
ANP: Afghan National Police
ANSF: Afghan National Security Forces
AOG: Armed Opposition Groups
AREU: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
BPHS: Basic Package of Health Services
CBARD: Community Based Agricultural Rural Development
CHAMP: Commercial Horticulture and Agricultural Marketing Program
DABS: Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat
FATA: Federally Administered Tribal Areas
GLE: Governor-Led Eradication
HAG: Humanitarian Access Group
HCT: Humanitarian Country Team
HPC: High Peace Council
ICC: International Criminal Court
ICRC: International Committee of the Red Cross
IED: improvised explosive device
IMU: Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
ISAF: International Security Assistance Force
ISI: Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan
ISIS: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISK: Islamic State Khorasan
JENA: Joint Education and Child Protection Needs Assessment
KFZ: Kandahar Food Zone
MSF: Médecins Sans Frontières
NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDS: National Directorate of Security
NSAG: Non-State Armed Group
NSP: Afghanistan National Solidarity Program
PRT: Provincial Reconstruction Team
OCHA: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODA: Official Development Assistance, United States
OHCHR: United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
REACH: Afghanistan Education in Emergency Working Group
TLO: The Liaison Office
TTP: Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan
UNAMA: United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Fund
USAID: United States Agency for International Development
USFOR-A: United States Forces in Afghanistan
WFP: World Food Programme

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Overview

This context analysis examines the humanitarian, political, societal, and economic dimensions that make the protracted conflict in Afghanistan intractable and precarious for civilian populations. The report is based on field visits to numerous regions in Afghanistan in July 2018—which included interviews and consultations with a variety of actors, including political stakeholders, humanitarian agencies, and populations affected by conflict—as well as a review of recent and relevant literature. The purpose of this analysis is to (1) provide a current assessment of the conflict, drawing from field interviews and an in-depth assemblage of various reports and resources, (2) examine the interconnected and interdependent interests fueling the conflict, and (3) suggest that if these dynamics persist in the way they have for decades, recent elections and peace talks will represent yet another setback for Afghan communities and a peaceful future for the country.

Introduction

Decades of conflict have rendered Afghanistan politically and socially fractured, its population profoundly and violently affected, and its future precarious. While Afghanistan has demonstrated a vibrant and resilient national character—particularly in the face of foreign presence and occupation, and despite a plethora of international political pressures, including allegiances to regional powers—the country today remains constrained by complex obstacles that impede its ability to thrive in the absence of international actors driving assistance, stabilization, state-building, and development agendas. Indeed, since the United States invasion in late 2001, while international discourse has promoted a commitment to the stability, peace, and the rebuilding of Afghanistan, the country has grown increasingly beholden to the ambitions and decisions of international stakeholders. Many Afghans place blame for the country’s current precarious state on the very international efforts intended to help the country emerge out of protracted conflict and dependency. In the pointed words of one Afghan interviewed for this report:

International engagement is, in fact, central to Afghanistan’s current predicament. Military presence is a key driver of the conflict; the war economy is lucrative to the elite and many international interests. In this context, the notion that ordinary Afghans might benefit on any significant scale from development or humanitarian assistance is questionable, even though there are some successes.

Without a critical reevaluation of the drivers of the conflict, the responsibilities for how the conflict has unfolded, and the consequences of perpetuating instability in the country, the diverse and imbricated challenges that Afghanistan faces will render its ability to turn the page on a history of violence tenuous, if not impossible. Indeed, on the seventeenth anniversary of the initiation of the U.S. invasion, at least fifty-four Afghans were killed

across the country¹ and it has been estimated that the Taliban control more territory today than at any time since the United States-led military effort overthrew the group in 2001.²

I. The Human Cost of the Conflict

Decades of conflict in Afghanistan have drawn the civilian population into cycles of violence and destruction that have substantially transformed the country's social, political, and economic structures. During the period of Soviet invasion and occupation (1979-1989), Afghan society was systematically divided, militarized, and decimated, costing the lives of between 800,000 – 1.5 million Afghans.³ Following the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989, the country spiraled into civil war as mujahedeen commanders, initially financed and armed by international actors—namely, the United States and its allies (Pakistan and other states in the Gulf region)—sought to overthrow the government before turning on one another. As the war led to massive destruction of Afghan cities and deeper societal divisions, Afghans and the international community, weary from relentless violence, began to look toward an opposition force that would put an end to the conflict.⁴ In a United States Department of State Daily Press Briefing in 1996, State Department Spokesman Glyn Davies remarked,

We're simply at the stage today of noting the fact that today the Taliban took Kabul, and they control Kabul; and we're at the stage of indicating the direction in which we hope the Taliban goes...We hope that this presents an opportunity for a process of national reconciliation to begin. We hope very much and expect that the Taliban will respect the rights of all Afghans, and that the new authorities will move quickly to restore order and security, and to form a representative interim government on the way to some form of national reconciliation.⁵

However, as the Taliban gradually took control over large areas of the country, they imposed increasingly stricter laws, grounded in exceedingly conservative interpretations of Islam. Taliban justice was bloody, and while Afghans were relatively protected from the

¹ "17 Years to the Day the US Invaded, 54 Are Killed Across Afghanistan," New York Times. 7 October 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/07/world/asia/afghanistan-casualties-anniversary.html>

² "Why Afghanistan is more dangerous than ever," BBC News. 14 September 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-45507560>

³ As this report indicates, this figure is an estimation; the distinction between those who were civilians and those who were *hors de combat* remains unclear. For more analysis, see "Afghanistan: Soviet invasion and civil war," World Peace Foundation. 7 August 2015. <https://sites.tufts.edu/atrocityendings/2015/08/07/afghanistan-soviet-invasion-civil-war/#Fatalities>

⁴ For a report offering an overview of humanitarian action during this time, see Paula R. Newburg, "Politics at the Heart: The Architecture of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2 July 1999. <https://carnegieendowment.org/1999/07/02/politics-at-heart-architecture-of-humanitarian-assistance-to-afghanistan-pub-686>

⁵ "US Department of State Daily Press Briefing," #156, 96-09-27. 27 September 1996. <http://www.hri.org/news/usa/std/1996/96-09-27.std.html>

physical insecurities of war, they lived in a social and psychological prison, imposed by Sharia law and enforced by the Taliban Religious Police.⁶

The security situation in the country is more volatile and fragile today than in the early years of the American invasion.⁷ What is occurring today in Afghanistan is not simply a protracted armed conflict, but rather, a culmination of diverse violent conflicts and rapidly shifting frontlines.⁸ Between international military operations, persistent hostilities, insurgent groups, criminality, and systemic forms of police and political violence, the civilian population and the country's infrastructure remain under deliberate and consistent attack. Afghanistan remains extremely fragile under the pressures of competing international agendas, staggering rates of poverty, social fragmentation, widespread corruption and impunity, drug production and addiction, trafficking, child labor, and a confluence of other factors creating pervasive and permissive systems of violence.⁹ From security to health, Afghans are affected in every aspect of their lives.

A. Severe Insecurity

Estimates indicate that "complex and suicide attacks [are] the leading cause of civilian casualties," particularly in urban areas.¹⁰ Since 2016, attacks attributed to insurgent groups have increased, particularly by car and truck bombs in Kabul and other major urban centers. These attacks allegedly target government and international military targets, but cause mass civilian casualties. Civilians living in major cities are subjected to frequent and sudden surges in violence on a daily basis, interfering with their access to services, security, and

⁶ For an overview of the impact of the conflict on Afghan society during this time, see Larry P. Goodson, *Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics and the Rise of the Taliban*. University of Washington Press. 2015, Chapter 4. See also Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*. Yale University Press. 2002, Chapters 2-4. See generally Nazif Shahrani, *Modern Afghanistan: The Impact of 40 Years of War*. Indiana University Press. 2018.

⁷ "The Death Toll for Afghan Forces is Secret. Here's Why," New York Times. 18 September 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/21/world/asia/afghanistan-security-casualtiestaliban.html?login=email&auth=login-email#click=https://t.co/YbydJsgTAW>, which states, "Seventeen years after the United States went to war in Afghanistan, the Taliban is gaining momentum, seizing territory, and killing Afghan security forces in record numbers." See also "War-related Death, Injury, and Displacement in Afghanistan and Pakistan 2001-2014," The Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, 22 May 2015, p.3.

<https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2015/War%20Related%20Casualties%20Afghanistan%20and%20Pakistan%202001-2014%20FIN.pdf>

⁸ "The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia," The Asia Foundation. 11 October 2017.

<https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Afghanistan-StateofConflictandViolence.pdf>

⁹ For analysis on child labor in Afghanistan, see "They Bear All the Pain" Hazardous Child Labor in Afghanistan. Human Rights Watch. 14 July 2016. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/14/they-bear-all-pain/hazardous-child-labor-afghanistan>. The other elements identified are addressed in various sections throughout this paper.

¹⁰ "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security," Report of the Secretary-General. United Nations Security Council. 6 June 2018. https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/sg_report_on_afghanistan_6_june.pdf

livelihoods.¹¹ In 2017, there were over 10,000 civilian fatalities, over 800 of which were children.¹² Between January and September 2018, there have been at least 8,050 civilian casualties (2,798 civilians have been killed and 5,252 others injured) across the country,¹³ the highest recorded since 2014, according to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).¹⁴ Included in this figure are 829 recorded female casualties (250 deaths and 579 injuries) and 2,136 recorded child casualties (653 deaths and 1,483 injured).¹⁵

Aid workers, journalists, teachers, medical staff, and civilian infrastructure have been, and continue to be regularly targeted by non-state armed groups (NSAGs). Security risks for local humanitarian organizations remain high, with little confidence in police forces or military troops to curb this violence. The Taliban also targets Afghan security and police forces, diminishing their capacities to protect civilians. Civilians are consistently vulnerable to forced recruitment, child labor, early and forced marriage, movement restrictions, as well as gender-based violence and violence related to criminal activity. As in many conflicts, women and children are disproportionately affected by these insecurities with little protection guarantees, particularly as the space for open and adaptable civilian protection programming is increasingly constrained. Further exacerbating these protection risks are the hazards inherent in cyclical “negative coping mechanisms”—for example, child labor, early marriage, begging, human trafficking, recruitment by NSAGs, and illicit business—to which civilians turn in order to mitigate the effects of insecurities for themselves and their families.

Research interviews for this report, with civilians living in the thirteen provinces most affected by the conflict, also noted significant and frequent casualties at the hands of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and the Afghan National Police (ANP), as well as the repossession by NSAGs of weaponry and logistical supplies. The recent attacks by the Taliban in Ghazni in July 2018 confirm this trend. Furthermore, as the interviews noted, “The context of conflict reveals a sophistication of weapons, [affecting both] armed opposition groups (AOGs), and the Afghan National Army (ANA),” of which the number of casualties is unknown, but described as “significant” by interviewees.

Aerial attacks also cause significant damage on the ground, including not only physical casualties, but also in terms of the psychological impact of these attacks on the population. Between January and September 2018, international air operations showed a 39% increase from the same time period one year ago, in 2017.¹⁶ The civilian casualties from aerial

¹¹ “No Safe Place”: Insurgent Attacks on Civilians in Afghanistan. Human Rights Watch, 8 May 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/05/08/no-safe-place/insurgent-attacks-civilians-afghanistan>

¹² “Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Annual Report,” UNAMA. 15 February 2018. <https://unama.unmissions.org/afghanistan-10000-civilian-casualties-2017-un-report-suicide-attacks-and-ieds-caused-high-number>

¹³ “Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict 2018 quarterly report,” UNAMA. 10 October 2018. https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_3rd_quarter_report_2018_10_oct.pdf

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Deaths of civilians spike as US, Afghan air forces pound Afghanistan,” CNN. 10 October 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/10/asia/afghanistan-airstrikes-civilian-deaths-un-report-intl/index.html>

operations over this period alone have already surpassed the number of casualties recorded by UNAMA over the course of an entire year, since the agency started documenting civilian casualties in 2009. These increases have also been attributed to international military engagement. Data on military operations, particularly the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) information on casualties, has become classified at the request of President Ashraf Ghani, with support from the United States Forces in Afghanistan (USFOR-A).¹⁷ This inclination to conceal key information related to government forces, trends, attrition figures, operational readiness, or territorial control remains a symptom of ongoing pressure on the battlefield. The insurgency continues to press Afghan and international forces, with escalating coordinated and targeted attacks.

The security situation for Afghans has significantly deteriorated, particularly over recent years. Afghan Authorities have argued that the surge in violence has been exacerbated after the withdrawal of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops in 2014 and the reduction of funding for the Afghan security apparatus. As one Afghan military interlocutor interviewed for this report noted, “When the international military presence scaled down massively in 2014, many provinces were too fragile to manage security and became hostages of the conflict. The disengagement has translated into the eruption of attacks.” However, it is possible that the surge in violence also illustrates the lack of adequate planning and strategic approaches to mitigating the ramifications of these decisions on civilians. Furthermore, the reform of the Afghan armed forces and security forces, coupled with the new entitlements of the Afghan border police, have not had a significant impact on the daily security of Afghans, particularly in terms of safe and uninhibited travel throughout the country.

B. Weakened Public Health System

The persistent targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure has led to widespread vulnerabilities for communities, not only due to the immediate shock of attacks, but also in terms of the long-term implications of disabled infrastructure. This element has been especially prominent in the area of health. As one humanitarian actor noted, “There is a staggering and unacceptable number of violent attacks on healthcare...and an alarming lack of respect for the neutrality and sanctity of healthcare and of international humanitarian law. Medical personnel are attacked or threatened, patients are shot in their hospital beds, hospitals are bombed.”¹⁸ Reports indicate that, in 2017, 24 health facilities were attacked and damaged either deliberately or as collateral damage through attacks directed at other

¹⁷ See this article, which discusses the decision of the Afghan government to keep casualty figures classified: “Afghan security forces suffer stark fall in numbers,” CNN. 7 May 2018.

<https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/07/asia/afghan-security-forces-casualty-figures-intl/index.html>

¹⁸ Dr. Richard Peepkorn, WHO Country Representative in Afghanistan, cited in: “Attacks on health care on the rise in Afghanistan,” WHO. 19 August 2017. <http://www.emro.who.int/afg/afghanistan-news/attacks-on-healthcare-on-the-rise-in-afghanistan.html>

targets, disrupting access to health care for approximately 3 million Afghans.¹⁹ Trauma care represents an increasing part of health and humanitarian action, particularly given the rise in suicide attacks in densely populated, urban areas. Between January and September 2017, over 69,000 trauma cases were reported, a 21% increase in the same period of time during the previous year.²⁰

On the one hand, the investment and cooperation made in the health sector since 2001 have had a significant positive impact for Afghans, representing a marker of hope for long-term development, particularly in light of the decline of maternal mortality, the mortality of children under five years old, the creation of, and access to, the basic package of health services (BPHS) in most provinces, and the establishment of provincial referral hospitals. On the other hand, the capacities of the Ministry of Health and medical facilities remain fully dependent on international funding for training, infrastructure, and adequate medical materials. The objective of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to render the health care system more self-reliant has not yet had its intended positive impact in most parts of the country.²¹ Public health has been as precarious as the health sector itself, with ongoing programming to tackle polio,²² a rise in tuberculosis-related deaths,²³ and severe acute malnutrition in numerous provinces.²⁴ The deliberate targeting of health facilities further weakens the already fragile health system.

There are several key dimensions that are important when considering the health system and international interventions on health.²⁵ There remains a lack of sustainable medical programming for Afghan communities across the country, while the enduring inconsistency in the quality of services provided by international actors and the local communities contributes to systems of substitution, rather than supplementing and supporting local systems. There is also limited involvement of local medical services and processes, as well as

¹⁹ "Attacks on health care on the rise in Afghanistan," WHO. 19 August 2017.

<http://www.emro.who.int/afg/afghanistan-news/attacks-on-healthcare-on-the-rise-in-afghanistan.html>

²⁰ "2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview," OCHA. December 2017.

<https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/document/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-overview-2018>

²¹ See generally USAID's Health Sector Resiliency Program. <https://www.USAid.gov/news-information/fact-sheets/health-sector-resiliency-hsr>

²² See generally the Global Polio Eradication Initiative in Afghanistan:

<http://polioeradication.org/where-we-work/>

²³ "Tuberculosis burden increases in Afghanistan with over 60,000 new cases every year," WHO. 28 March 2017. <http://www.emro.who.int/afg/afghanistan-news/tuberculosis-burden-increases-in-afghanistan-with-over-60-000-new-cases-every-year.html>

²⁴ "Child Malnutrition Mounts in Afghan Province," Institute for War & Peace Reporting. 27 April 2017. <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/child-malnutrition-mounts-afghan-province>

²⁵ For an overview of relevant issues, see, for example: Acerra, J. R., Iskyan, K., Qureshi, Z. A., & Sharma, R. K. (2009). Rebuilding the health care system in Afghanistan: an overview of primary care and emergency services. *International journal of emergency medicine*, 2(2), 77-82.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2700223/>

minimal communication about health programming within communities. It is also important to consider the evaluation of health programming, with the recognition and acknowledgement of the political context in which such programming is implemented. Finally, the importance of developing psycho-social support as a central dimension of medical and health programming should not be understated.

Example of health programming by Médecins Sans Frontières

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has developed its operational invention by in close consideration of the security context. MSF has expanded its medical presence in “garrison cities” where there are minimal security guarantees and limited access to the different parties. This is a vision for the long-term. MSF has chosen a very specific approach by implementing high-quality medical programs in affected places with an important contingent of international staff, including fifteen in Khost, thirty in Kunduz, and twenty in Laskhar Gah. This strategy has been creating an environment in which some medical facilities have the capacity to treat patients at the highest medical standard (\$6 million of investment made for a TB program in Kandahar, which operates twenty beds, and the rebuilding of the Kunduz medical structure for more than \$26 million) and with the theory that according to an MSF senior staff, “if people take such risks to access the health facilities, we have to offer the best program as we can.” MSF seeks to offer a full medical package—visible and impactful for the beneficiaries—“while leaving the rest of the medical facilities in the provinces of presence to their own fate,” according several Afghan medical personal in public health facilities. Other limits to this program exist with regards to the restrained outreach presence, clinics and mobile initiatives, trainings for its staff (in particular for midwives) and questionable sustainability if the organization should leave (the functioning of the MSF hospital in Kunduz is estimated at \$7 million a year). Currently, MSF describes this model as the best way to rationalize the risk exposure while preserving high-standard medical acts. The international organization experience also corroborates the fact that the presence of international NGOs is important in an environment where local NGOs have very strong pressures (corruption, diversion of aid). Resisting local pressures, but also understanding the context, demonstrate MSF’s added value and impact on daily basis, but only for a limited number of patients.

C. Inaccessible Education

In 2017, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Afghanistan Education in Emergency Working Group (REACH) conducted a Joint Education and Child Protection Needs Assessment (JENA) to identify the challenges and barriers to education across Afghanistan as a result of the conflict. This survey found that, for girls and boys alike, insecurity and violence represented the main barrier to accessing

education.²⁶ In 2015, UNAMA and the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF) recorded 132 cases in which schools or school personnel were threatened or attacked, which represents an increase of 86% from 2014, and a 110% increase from 2013. This led to the closing or partial closing of more than 369 schools, "affecting at least 139,048 students and 600 teachers."²⁷ In Jalalabad, for example, repeated threats forced all schools to close for several months. Other reports cite that when the Taliban attacked northeastern Baghlan province, for example, according to a primary school headmaster in the province, the Taliban "warned us to close our schools...Even after the attack, we weren't able to re-open the girls' schools."²⁸

Today, Afghanistan has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world for those aged 15 and over, with a male literacy rate of 62% and a female literacy rate of 18% (the median for low income countries is 70% for males and 57% for females).²⁹ Conflict, corruption, and a failing education system have caused approximately 3.7 million children (between the ages of 7 and 17) to be left out of school and susceptible to forced labor, recruitment, and exploitation.³⁰ Nearly half of school-aged children between 6 and 14 years old are also involved in child labor.³¹ Those living in rural areas are significantly less likely to access education if they are involved in labor activities, and working children "whose mothers have no education (49%) are less likely to attend school compared with their counterparts whose mothers have attained secondary education or higher (88%),"³² demonstrating the cascading implications of lack of education for girls in the country.

Attacks on schools and the occupation of educational facilities by armed groups have continued throughout the country. Decades of increasing investment in the education sector in Afghanistan are continually damaged and squandered as a consequence of conflict. Between 2002 and 2014, the United States invested over \$759.6 million in education, and the Official Development Assistance (ODA) increased from \$22.75 million in 2002 to \$449.8 million in 2013.³³ And yet, persistent insecurity, dismal school structures (forcing some

²⁶ Joint Education and Child Protection Needs Assessment - North-East Region, Afghanistan. September 2017. http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach_afg_factsheet_joint_education_needs_assessment_north_east_region_sept2017.pdf

²⁷ "Education Sector Analysis: Afghanistan," Volume I. Pours Consult Aps. June 2016. <https://www.globalpartnership.org/download/file/fid/62236>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ See generally, Education Policy and Data Center, National Education Profile for Afghanistan. 2014. <https://www.epdc.org/education-data-research/afghanistan-national-education-profile>

³⁰ Ministry of Education, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Samuel Hall, "All in School and Learning: Global Initiative on Out-Of-School Children" – Afghanistan Country Study, Ministry of Education, UNICEF, Samuel Hall and USAID, Kabul, 2018. See also generally, UNICEF education programming for Afghanistan. <https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/education>

³¹ Ibid.

³² Education Sector Analysis Afghanistan Volume I. Pours Consult Aps. June 2016. <https://www.globalpartnership.org/download/file/fid/62236>

³³ Arne Strand, "Financing Education in Afghanistan," ReliefWeb. 2015. <https://www.cmi.no/publications/6154-financing-education-in-afghanistan>

students to attend school outdoors or in tents), poor water and sanitation facilities, low quality curricula, lack of classroom materials, and overburdened teachers do not reflect the expected impact on this investment.

D. Climate-induced vulnerability

Adding to the insecurity of conflict, estimates indicate that 275,000 Afghans are affected by climate-induced vulnerabilities stemming from natural disasters, resource scarcity, resulting lack of livelihoods, severe malnutrition, and displacement.³⁴ Despite long-term investment from donors, with a large proportion directed to supporting agriculture, Afghanistan remains unable to withstand climate shocks and resulting insecurity. While claiming to have a development-oriented strategy, the international community has continued to fund short-term, high-impact programming such as cash—once considered a last resort for vulnerable families, it is now a first solution. There has been a comparatively lower level of investment in long-term models of resilience against natural disasters that could significantly mitigate the compounding vulnerabilities of climate change in conflict.

Each year, Afghanistan loses the equivalent of approximately \$280 million in agricultural resources due to natural disasters, compromising access to adequate nutrition.³⁵ The United Nations has reported that 1.9 million people face “emergency” levels of food insecurity, with 5.6 million in “crisis,” and nearly 10 million in “stressed” levels of food insecurity.³⁶ Malnutrition remains high, particularly among children. It is estimated that 1.6 million children below the age of five are suffering from acute malnutrition in 2018, with approximately half living in conflict-affected areas of the country.³⁷ Women, children, and female-headed households are most critically affected, as cultural norms and restrictions severely limit their access to resources.

E. Forced Displacement

Estimates indicate that, by the end of 2017, approximately 507,000 Afghans were forced to flee their homes due to conflict over the course of the year.³⁸ Nangarhar province, for

³⁴ “Worst drought in decades grips two-thirds of Afghanistan, Al Jazeera. 20 August 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/08/worst-drought-decades-grips-two-thirds-afghanistan-180820131734405.html>. See also “More Afghans displaced by drought than conflict, U.N. says,” Reuters. 11 September 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/US-afghanistan-drought/more-afghans-displaced-by-drought-than-conflict-u-n-says-idusKCN1LR0UZ>

³⁵ “2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview,” OCHA. December 2017. <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/document/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-overview-2018>.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “Afghanistan Humanitarian Situation Report January – June 2018,” UNICEF. ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/unicef-afghanistan-humanitarian-situation-report-january-june-2018>

³⁸ “Afghanistan: 2017 Humanitarian Response Plan - Annual Review (January - December 2017),” 1 May 2018. <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/document/afghanistan-common-humanitarian-fund-2017-annual-report>

example, registered a 310% increase in the numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 2016 due to the Afghan National Defence Security Forces (ANDSF) and coalition forces' escalating campaign against NSAGs in the eastern region.³⁹ In conflict-affected areas, repeated or intensified fighting has prompted many communities to flee to urban settings, where prospects for livelihoods and access to services are greater. Many IDPs have also been forced to move several times to protect themselves from conflict. As in many contexts, women remain highly vulnerable in displacement, not only due to violence but also because they are less likely to receive assistance than males.⁴⁰

Adding to the stress of migration is the issue of returnees to Afghanistan.⁴¹ Estimates indicate that approximately 160,000 people have returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan in 2017, as well as over 450,000 from Iran.⁴² Many returnees come back to the country with little resources and depend on their families and networks for support, adding a strain to already vulnerable communities and on international assistance. Of course, returnees are subjected to a number of protection risks, including loss of documentation and risks of deportation. Returnees are also particularly vulnerable to smuggling, trafficking, labor, and recruitment into armed groups, particularly considering that approximately 20% of all displaced populations are now residing in what OCHA defines as "hard to reach areas."⁴³

II. Conflict Dynamics

As the previous section described, the security situation in Afghanistan for civilian populations has become the driving source of protection concerns in the country today. Frontlines shift rapidly, and often toward densely populated urban areas. This section offers an overview of the conflict dynamics present in Afghanistan. In particular, it focuses on the Taliban and Islamic State Khorasan (ISK), or Daesh. It also discusses the main international interests influencing the ongoing conflict in the country.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ "2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview," OCHA. December 2017.

<https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/document/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-overview-2018>

⁴¹ See: "Returning to Fragility: Exploring the Link between Conflict and Returnees in Afghanistan," Oxfam. 2018: https://d1tn3vj7xz9fdh.cloudfront.net/s3fs-public/file_attachments/rr-returning-fragility-afghanistan-310118-en.pdf

⁴² "Returns to Afghanistan in 2017 Joint IOM-UNHCR Summary Report," 28 February 2018. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/document_48.pdf. For information on returnees from Iran see "Why economic turmoil in Iran is causing big problems in Afghanistan" <https://www.irinnews.org/news/2018/09/11/why-economic-turmoil-iran-causing-big-problems-afghanistan>; and "Afghans forced out of Iran or migrating back "for survival" find little assistance to start anew" <https://www.sida.se/globalassets/sida/sve/sa-arbetar-vi/humanitart-bistand/afghanistan-humanitarian-crises-analysis-2018.pdf>

⁴³ "Afghanistan: Hard to Reach Assessment Report," June 2018. OCHA. June 2018. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-hard-reach-assessment-report-june-2018>

A. The Taliban Movement

1. Military Activities and Political Influence

According to a UNAMA interlocutor, targeted and deliberate attacks on civilians, mainly attributed to the Taliban, remain the third leading cause of casualties in Afghanistan. In April, as every year, the Taliban announced an offensive, this year named the *Al Khandaq*.⁴⁴ According to the Taliban's April 2018 statement, their operations are directed "against the foreign invaders and their internal and external supporters" and are "deemed as a legal, moral, and security obligation by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as a defending force of the pious values of Islam and the territorial integrity of our homeland."⁴⁵ This rhetoric explicitly mentions the presence of the foreign troops (the United States and their affiliates), against which the Taliban has fought tirelessly. The Taliban also refers to the level of damage and corruption brought on by the presence and engagement of the international community, not only in the society, but also in the government. The narrative of a corrupt, failed government propped up by the international community is central to the Taliban's message and motivation to fight and destabilize the authorities.⁴⁶

The Taliban's military capacity is currently estimated to be between 50,000 and 60,000 men deployed throughout the country and covering at least seventeen provinces,⁴⁷ which represents more than 50% of the country.⁴⁸ In their operations, the Taliban have also developed more sophisticated attacks and have the capacity to conduct significant operations to take the control of cities such as Faryab, Farah, and Ghazni, even if for a matter of hours. Reports have indicated that the Taliban are attacking civilians and government forces in a more systematic way and have been accumulating significant stocks of weapons.⁴⁹ To the Taliban's supporters, the fact that they are one of the most active armed

⁴⁴ See "Taliban announce spring offensive, dismisses peace overtures," Reuters. 25 April 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/US-afghanistan-taliban/taliban-announce-spring-offensive-dismisses-peace-overtures-idUSKBN1HW0SG>

⁴⁵ "Declaration of the Islamic Emirate about the inauguration of Al Khandaq Jihadi operations," 25 April 2018.

⁴⁶ See generally Thomas H. Johnson, *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018. On the Taliban's strategy of "out-govern[ing]" the central government, see "The Taliban's Fight for Hearts and Minds," Foreign Policy. 12 September 2018. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/12/the-talibans-fight-for-hearts-and-minds-afghanistan/>

⁴⁷ See: Rod Nordland, Ash Ngu, Fahim Abed, "How the US Government Misleads the Public on Afghanistan," New York Times. 8 September 2018; See also this source for a higher estimate from an Afghan general: "Afghan general: There are a lot more Taliban fighters than previously thought," Stars and Stripes. 12 June 2018. <https://www.stripes.com/news/afghan-general-there-are-a-lot-more-taliban-fighters-than-previously-thought-1.532312>

⁴⁸ See "Taliban control of Afghanistan on the rise, US inspector says," CNN. 8 November 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/01/middleeast/afghanistan-report-taliban-gains-control-intl/index.html>; see also Rod Nordland, Ash Ngu, Fahim Abed. "How the US Government Misleads the Public on Afghanistan," New York Times. 8 September 2018.

⁴⁹ See "The Taliban Have Gone High-Tech. That Poses a Dilemma for the US," New York Times. 1 April 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/01/world/asia/taliban-night-vision.html>

actors responsible for targeted violence against civilians and human rights abuses has not yet discredited the Taliban's discourse.⁵⁰ As one interviewee said, "War is inevitable for the Taliban, the government is not able to stop them, and has no choice but to compromise regarding its presence in many provinces."

In terms of the scale of the Taliban's influence and control, the U.S. military estimates that the Afghanistan government effectively "controls or influences" 56% of the country.⁵¹ But a closer examination of that figure indicates that, as *The New York Times* has reported, "In several districts, the Afghan government controls only the district headquarters and military barracks, while the Taliban control the rest."⁵² Furthermore, the Taliban has the ability to exert a significant amount of influence over territories that it does not actually control.⁵³ It appears that there is a denial, among the U.S. and Afghan authorities, of the scale and impact of insurgents' control and influence, despite the visible deterioration of security in many provinces.

Politically speaking, the Taliban remains present at both the local and national levels and is very visible in Kabul, where its leaders make and communicate decisions. While Taliban leaders do not have significant influence on local commanders and their decisions, it is understood that local commanders do take orders from Mullahs such as Ezatullah and Ezahuddin Satrudi in Peshawar. In rural areas, as one interviewee noted, "The Taliban do not have to do much to attract supporters, as the central authorities are so discredited by their lack of integrity." Moreover, the population is exhausted by insecurity, unpredictability, and an absence of gains from international investment during the past sixteen years. The Taliban extol a return of Islamic Law to govern the country. "Legitimacy comes from religion" for them, as an interviewee stated.

Given this dynamic, tensions among government leadership and local military commanders benefit the Taliban, validating their propaganda, which emphasizes the notion that the authorities have failed to implement reforms and have fallen short of bringing credible governance. It also reinforces the perception that there is no clear end in sight for U.S. presence and its substantial involvement in constructing and supporting the central government authority. The Taliban now controls large swaths of territory, even entire districts, and have established functioning social services in many of these locations.

⁵⁰ See also Jason Lyall, Graeme Blair, and Kosuke Imai, "Explaining Support for Combatants during Wartime: A Survey Experiment in Afghanistan," *American Political Science Review*. November 2013, which finds evidence that when civilians are harmed by ISAF, the likelihood is that their support for the Taliban will increase. Conversely, when the Taliban victimizes civilians, they are not necessarily more likely to then have more support for ISAF. <http://www.jasonlyall.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/support.pdf>

⁵¹ Rod Nordland, Ash Ngu, Fahim Abed. "How the US Government Misleads the Public on Afghanistan," *New York Times*. 8 September 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/09/08/world/asia/US-misleads-on-afghanistan.html>

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ashley Jackson, "Life under the Taliban shadow government," ODI. June 2018. <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12269.pdf>

One of the main differences between the Taliban today, versus during their regime, is that they have reconsidered their public communication strategy, as illustrated by their public official statements, orders given to the population in the territories they control, and in the organization of public events. Tactically, the Taliban have also invested in developing their technology departments, with increased capacity in drones mapping and air surveillance, purportedly provided by Russia.⁵⁴

The situation on the ground, as one author noted, continues to “drive a wedge between the Taliban and the civilian population to apply practical solutions” and “is especially problematic when so many Taliban are local nationals fighting to protect their livelihoods, property and territory, or when rural Afghans look at gunmen to ward off predatory policemen and favour the quick and rough justice offered by the Taliban’s itinerant *qazis* (judges) over the state’s dysfunctional criminal justice system.”⁵⁵ Indeed, illustrating this reality, in April 2018, as a result of government offensives in Logar province, the Taliban closed at least 30 schools in reaction to a government presence in this area. According to local province officials, up to 12,000 students—including 2,500 girls—were unable to attend school as a result of this closure.⁵⁶ Despite continued reports from local populations regarding the insecurity of the province, local police and government forces have done little to secure the region for civilian populations.

To illustrate how many of the dynamics discussed in this section have played out in emblematic areas in Afghanistan, the following two sub-sections will offer a concise overview of the Taliban’s control and influence in two locations: Logar province and Ghazni province.

Azra District (Logar Province)

The Azra district, or Logar province, has been a Taliban stronghold since 2010 and is emblematic of pervasive violence. The government does little to ensure civilian security, and “the Taliban control approximately 70% of this province, where they enforce their own laws and have recently increased targeted killings across the province, something intolerable.”⁵⁷ Initially, the Taliban invested heavily in the establishment of essential facilities, such as schools and medical clinics. Today, however, the BPHS works minimally, with prescriptions that are unaffordable for local populations, along with inadequate medical equipment and infrastructure. Over time, the province has become increasingly militarized, and the Taliban began dividing local communities along tribal and family lines, creating additional tensions

⁵⁴ “Russia ‘arming the Afghan Taliban’, says US,” BBC. 23 March 2018.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43500299>

⁵⁵ Rob Johnson, *The Afghan way of war, culture and pragmatism, a critical history*. C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd. 2014. p. 304-306.

⁵⁶ “Taliban Closes 30 Schools in Logar,” TOLO News. 6 April 2018.

<https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/taliban-closes-30-schools-logar>

⁵⁷ “Logar residents worried about growing insecurity,” Pajhwok Afghan News. 10 September 2018.

<https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2018/09/10/logar-residents-worried-about-growing-insecurity>

amid insecurity. Over time, the local Mullah established stronger justice mechanisms and courts that are affiliated with the Taliban.

Ghazni Province

On August 10, 2018, the Taliban launched its offensive in Ghazni province, with the aim of targeting Afghan national security forces and government infrastructure. On August 11 and 12, for example, Lieutenant Colonel Martin L. O'Donnell, Chief Spokesman for the United States military in Afghanistan, stated, "The city was relatively quiet Friday evening...clearing operations are ongoing and sporadic clashes are occurring...The Afghan government continued to hold their ground and maintain control of all government centers. Tactically, operationally and strategically, the Taliban achieved nothing with this failed attack."⁵⁸ However, reports from *The New York Times* on the very same days describe the following: "Taliban were seen in control of every city intersection. Fighting appeared to be spreading to districts bordering Ghazni...The Taliban appeared to be in control of most of the city. More than 100 Afghan police officers and soldiers are confirmed dead."⁵⁹

On August 13, Afghan and international forces regained control of the city. However, during that time period, the impact on civilians was substantial. UNAMA recorded that, as a result of the conflict, there were 210 civilian casualties between August 10-15, 2018.⁶⁰ The Taliban attacked civilian infrastructure, including telecommunication antennas, cut off communication capacities, and used civilian homes during the hostilities, creating tremendous fear and pressure for the local population.⁶¹ Among the impacts on civilians were power outages, water shortage, food shortages, intentional destruction of civilian property, and inability to leave their homes due to road blockages and violence. Many others were displaced, particularly for medical treatment, as the capacity of the Ghazni hospital was completely full.

Such offensives deepen sentiments of mistrust between Afghan populations and their government, particularly related to the government's ineffectiveness and lack of responsiveness when it comes to the protection and security of its people. It has been reported that the central government repeatedly dismissed the early signs of the offensive and continued to minimize the severity of the conflict "even as the Taliban broadcast its soldiers in downtown Ghazni on social media."⁶²

⁵⁸ Rod Nordland, Ash Ngu, Fahim Abed. "How the US Government Misleads the Public on Afghanistan," *New York Times*. 8 September 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/09/08/world/asia/US-misleads-on-afghanistan.html>

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ "Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict 2018 quarterly report," UNAMA. 10 October 2018.

https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_3rd_quarter_report_2018_10_oct.pdf

⁶¹ UNAMA Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict 2018 quarterly report. 10 October 2018.

⁶² "5 key lessons from the Taliban's deadly resurgence in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*. 19 August 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/08/19/5-key-lessons-from-the-talibans-deadly-resurgence-in-afghanistan/?utm_term=.b9cd0c73988e

B. Islamic State Khorasan

In January 2015, ISK emerged in Afghanistan, comprised mainly of some Taliban defectors from Afghanistan and Pakistan who merged their efforts and pledged allegiance to Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Pakistan remains their land of refuge. What remains obscure, however, is the structure and leadership of ISK today and how the fighters are organized and affiliated with other groups and networks, including ISIS, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and the Haqqani networks. What is evident in the provinces where the ISK has a presence or has intervened is that they consistently recruit children. In one example that UNAMA cited:

On 31 July 2018, approximately 250 self-proclaimed Daesh/ISKP [Islamic State Khorasan Province] fighters, including children, in Darzab district of Jawzjan province surrendered to Afghan National Security Forces after heavy fighting with the Taliban. Of the 89 detainees claiming to be below the age of 18, 55 were assessed by NDS [National Directorate of Security] to be children, with at least four children reported to be below the age of 12 years.⁶³

ISK remains today in strong opposition, if not competition, with the Taliban and has had to manage local deals with them in the fight against ANA and NDS forces. Conflicts have erupted between the two groups, and as one analyst noted, “Instead of the Taliban fighting the Afghan government and its U.S. backers, it now contends with an ISIS affiliate and others jockeying for power.”⁶⁴ Amir Dost Mohammad still has significant influence in the ISK movement, despite having once lost this connection due to tensions with the former head of ISK, Hafiz Sayed. Officially, there are no known negotiations between ISK and humanitarian or political actors. As one Taliban local leader interviewed for this report remarked, “[ISK] are criminals and even we do not know who they are. It is a daily challenge to try to connect to them.”

The strength of ISK has been much stronger than expected. An intelligence official interviewed estimated that “ISK has between 5,000 to 7,000 active fighters, with a capacity to renew and recruit additional local support.” Their sources of income are generated by illegal business, mainly narcotics and mine extraction, as well as extortion of fees and payments by the local populations in the territories they control. For example, despite the fact that the BPHS is, as one report notes, the “foundation of the Afghan health system and...the key instrument in its development,”⁶⁵ ISK has discontinued the BPHS in many areas under ISK

⁶³ “Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict 2018 quarterly report,” UNAMA. 10 October 2018. https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_3rd_quarter_report_2018_10_oct.pdf

⁶⁴ “Retired US Soldier Who Met Taliban Negotiators Says ‘Common Enemy’ Of ISIS May Help End War,” Task and Purpose. August 30, 2018 <https://taskandpurpose.com/isis-taliban-common-enemy-afghanistan/>

⁶⁵ “From Trauma to Recovery: Addressing Emergency Care in Afghanistan,” WHO. April 2018. <http://www.who.int/features/2018/emergency-care-afghanistan/en/>

control and influence. Community leaders are less willing to support aid and fear confrontations with the group, leaving families without adequate health care.

The Nangarhar province has been the theater of major conflicts and attacks among the parties for two years, with three districts (Deh-bala, Achin, Kot) that have been subject to the control or influence of NSAGs, including ISK. According to a local military commander, “there are regular operations run by the U.S. and NDS, which during the spring of 2018, killed more than 150 men from ISK”. The provincial capital was an epicenter of a dual fighting environment, heavily militarized, from where criminal activities propagated. It is a city of more than 350,000 people subject to violence, probably one of the most challenging areas in terms of security, described by its inhabitants as a “frontline city” between AOGs, government military and police forces, Taliban, criminals, and ISK fighters.

While it can be agreed that the main adversary for opposition groups is the government of Afghanistan and its international supporters, there remain confrontations between numerous armed groups, with changing leadership and alliances. The province of Nangarhar, for example, surpassed Kabul this year as the province with the highest number of civilian casualties between January and September 2018, which doubled for the same time period last year.⁶⁶ Between 2012 and 2013, the NDS was supporting ISK against the Taliban in the province of Nangarhar. Since that time, this alliance has been reversed. ISK retains a group of fighters in Nangarhar Province, but their influence has diminished as a result of Afghan and U.S. aerial attacks. Consequently, ISK has resorted to suicide attacks on civilians.⁶⁷ This element of shifting alliances highlights the complex, fluid nature of the environment that emanates from the shifting positions of NSAGs in this context.

C. International Influence and Local Dependency

Regional interests have had direct impacts on the propagation of Afghanistan’s conflicts, the drug trade, limited water resources, political influences, as well as religion and Islam. A collective interest to see and support a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan has not materialized since the U.S. invasion. Regional initiatives and agendas have had their own priorities with limited positive outcomes for Afghans. On the contrary, the activities of Afghanistan’s neighbors contribute to destabilizing the country on the long run.

1. Pakistan

One dominant influencer is bordering Pakistan, with tribal areas that remain devoid of rule of law, where illegal and predatory markets flourish, and where combatants, criminals, and Islamists have sought refuge. Due to these dynamics in its tribal areas, Pakistan continues to

⁶⁶ “Afghanistan civilian deaths highest since 2014: UN,” Al Jazeera. 11 October 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/10/afghanistan-civilian-deaths-highest-2014-181011143035598.html>

⁶⁷ “Are ISIS Fighters Prisoners or Honored Guests of the Afghan Government?” New York Times. 8 August 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/04/world/asia/islamic-state-prisoners-afghanistan.html>

be a force of destabilization and has long had the reputation of supporting and offering refuge to the Taliban and other Islamist groups. The links and support from the TTP over time have been well documented. Most of the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban factions continue to have sanctuaries in Pakistan, particularly in North and South Waziristan, located in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). While not all factions are affiliated or strategically aligned, there remain other unifying factors driving support and a common resistance against military operations (Pakistani or U.S.) and the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan.

On September 3, 2018, the U.S. cancelled (“reprogrammed”) an additional \$300 million in aid to Pakistan, totaling a cut of \$800 million over the year, “due to a lack of Pakistani decisive actions in support of the South Asia Strategy,”⁶⁸ which highlights Pakistan’s central role in maintaining regional security, stopping terrorism, and cooperating as a key agent in the region. Despite skepticism by the U.S., the Pakistani government insists that it is engaging in efforts to promote regional stability. In a statement issued on September 4, the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained:

Pakistan dismisses reported comments by deputy spokesperson of the Afghan Chief Executive Omid Meysam on September 3 [2018]. Pakistan is making untiring and sincere efforts to promote peace and stability in the region given its own serious stakes and security concerns, and not in return for any financial compensation...Improving [the] internal security situation in Afghanistan, which is the source of regional and international terrorist threats, remains [the] Afghan government’s exclusive responsibility together with its international partners. Pakistan has been wholeheartedly supporting these efforts.⁶⁹

Simultaneously, Pakistan claims that Afghanistan and its international supporters have not been successful in eradicating militants from the Pakistani Taliban, which Pakistan claims launch cross-border attacks from Afghanistan, where they are based.

Pakistani authorities have been proactive in generating talks with Afghans for the establishment of an “Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity.” In April, Prime Minister Shadid Khaqan Abbasi visited President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah to reiterate Pakistan’s positive engagement for a peace process, the management of regional security, the return of refugees, illegal business and border violations, and the fight against terrorism. Many remain skeptical about the intents and motivations of the Pakistani government to uphold these priorities and about Pakistan’s commitment to eradicating violent groups on both sides of the border.

⁶⁸ “US military confirms \$300m cut in aid to Pakistan,” The Guardian. 2 September 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/02/us-military-confirms-300m-cut-in-aid-to-pakistan>

⁶⁹ “Pakistan dismisses comments of Deputy Spokesperson of Afghan Chief Executive,” 4 September 2018. <https://asianetpakistan.com/official-news/355555/pakistan-dismisses-comments-of-deputy-spokesperson-of-afghan-chief-executive/>

2. Iran

Rising tensions between the U.S. and Iran have been the cause of growing fear amongst authorities in Kabul. Indeed, concern exists that Afghanistan will serve as the territory for these hostilities to play out, particularly since bordering nations have increasingly united over a common adversary: the United States.⁷⁰ On Afghanistan's western border, Iran has deported Afghans on yearly basis.⁷¹ While some Afghans have returned to Afghanistan, others have gone to neighboring countries or have sought resettlement in Europe, despite current restrictions and a shrinking space for welcoming them. In 2018, for example, reports indicate a rise in the number of crossings into Turkey with 30,000 Afghans entering between January and the end of May, compared to 6,000 in the same period of the previous year.⁷² Afghan refugees—in particular, unaccompanied children and women—face significant assistance and protection vulnerabilities. For those returning to Afghanistan, authorities do not have the capacity to organize the necessary support—including shelter provisions, assistance packages, and access to economic opportunities and jobs—for massive returns.

3. China

An important dimension of China's influence in Afghanistan has been economic. As one expert notes, "China would probably see the instability in Afghanistan as more of an opportunity than would most countries."⁷³ As in other contexts, China has leveraged its economic investment and expansion in order to increase its regional influence. These concrete investments over the years have been demonstrated, for example, in the:

\$3 billion, 30-year lease for the Aynak copper mine in Afghanistan, [as well as the establishment of] a railway link in September 2016, allowing freight to travel from far eastern China to the Afghani rail port of Hairatan. Shipments over that distance now take two weeks, down from six months by road.⁷⁴

Furthermore, strengthened by its strong relations and support of Pakistan, China is helping Pakistan build infrastructure projects through a \$62 billion deal called the China Pakistan Economic Corridor. In September, China and Pakistan opted to extend this \$50 billion

⁷⁰ "Afghanistan: Ombres iraniennes à la frontière," *Le Monde*. 20 August 2018. <http://lirelactu.fr/source/le-monde/8c07a4be-4ddd-41a2-8309-d69962853d4e>

⁷¹ "Mass Deportations of Afghans from Turkey: Thousands of migrants sent back in a deportation drive," Afghanistan Analysts Network. 21 June 2018. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/mass-deportations-afghans-turkey-thousands-migrants-sent-back-deportation-drive>

⁷² "Fleeing worsening war, Afghans find narrowing options in Turkey," IRIN. 24 September 2018.

⁷³ Stuart Orr, professor of strategic management at Deakin University in Australia, in "China Needs A Win in Afghanistan to Keep its Edge in Asian Trade," *Forbes*. 27 February 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ralphjennings/2018/02/27/china-needs-a-win-in-afghanistan-to-keep-its-edge-in-asian-trade/>

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Corridor towards Afghanistan, aiming to “accelerate industrial cooperation and the projects related with people's livelihoods.”⁷⁵

4. United States

Despite denouncing the unacceptable toll on civilian lives that the conflict in Afghanistan has inflicted, international forces have scaled up their use of aerial strikes over the past year, as their operations against the Taliban and ISK have intensified. In 2017, more than 2,000 air-strikes have been conducted, and for the first quarter of 2018, the total number of munitions dropped is twice the number for the same period last year, highlighting that the threat of NSAGs and the intensity of the conflicts have worsened. The U.S. aims, on the one hand, to leave space for political reconciliation and negotiations with all parties, while on the other hand, according to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine General Joseph Dunford, the strategy is to inflict on NSAGs enough damage to “convince the Taliban that they cannot win on the battlefield and that they must engage in a peace process.”⁷⁶ One U.S. official told *Reuters* that prospects for peace are also linked to the larger investment and motivation of the Afghan government to create a political and economic environment conducive to peace, stating that it has not done enough to create programs for Taliban defectors to have a viable alternative and livelihood, especially in the precarious economic and employment situation the country faces.⁷⁷

Today, U.S. and Afghan working groups in the government ministries, along with the donor community, have developed an “Afghan Compact,” an initiative geared toward defining and creating objective monitoring mechanisms to support reforms and solutions for enduring challenges related to governance, the economy, security, and peace and reconciliation.⁷⁸ Practically speaking, however, the decision-making regarding aspects of military and security for Afghanistan remains under the purview of the U.S. and other Western states, which have limited visibility on the challenges for populations at the field level. It is also critical, when defining the future of the country, to pay attention to Taliban perspectives, particularly in relation to local security dynamics, the return of IDPs, the risks of violent extremism, and the Taliban’s potential and will to engage in dialogue for the resolution of the conflict.

⁷⁵ “China and Pakistan decide to extend CPEC towards Afghanistan,” *The Economic Times*. 20 September 2018. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/china-and-pakistan-decide-to-extend-cpec-towards-afghanistan/articleshow/65754550.cms>

⁷⁶ “Mattis, in Afghanistan, tries fostering reconciliation as security worsens,” *Reuters*. 7 September 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-usa/mattis-in-afghanistan-tries-fostering-reconciliation-as-security-worsens-idUSKCN1LN0C1>

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ See generally, “U.S.-Afghan Statement on the Bilateral Compact Executive Committee Meeting,” <https://af.usembassy.gov/u-s-afghan-statement-bilateral-compact-executive-committee-meeting/>

Today, Afghans feel a great distance between their communities and the Western agendas driving their country. As one interviewee stated:

[The international community] tells lies to justify, make excuses, and are not honest about the current costs to deliver today. They have normalized a situation, so we cannot expect our leaders to do differently. The UN, the international community, and the U.S. remain totally disconnected from the realities and far away from affected people, their silence and acceptance of mediocre programs add blockages for Afghans in the end.

D. Privatization of War

The private sector has played a central role in fuelling, financing, and perpetuating the conflicts in Afghanistan. This was illustrated by the proactive leadership of the international community in engaging with local businesses and with the State, which was Blackwater's initial ambition. Between 2001 and 2017, it is estimated that the United States spent \$714 billion on the war in Afghanistan.⁷⁹ Recently, Blackwater's founder, Erik Prince, made the controversial proposal to privatize a large portion of the U.S. war in Afghanistan. Afghan officials have also rejected this plan, and NATO, in light of the Afghan government's opposition to the proposal, has said the proposal to privatize the conflict is "out of the question."⁸⁰ Yet Prince continues to tout the plan as a cost-effective way to turn the war around.

Despite clear failures of the authorities to initiate and implement meaningful changes in the direction of the conflict, critical reflection on the role and responsibility of privatization as a mechanism of substitution is essential. As of October 2018, CENTCOM has noted a total of 25,239 private contractors in Afghanistan across 11 mission categories.⁸¹ Privatization does not negate the importance of ensuring ongoing monitoring and adherence to international laws and principles. It has also been argued that the U.S. and its allies have long-term strategic goals (ridding the country of the Taliban, eliminating IS and Al Qaeda, neutralizing Pakistan's influence, controlling the informal and criminal economy, and investing in stabilization) that remain at the center of Western intervention in the country. With investigations of funds wasted, discovery of fraud, kickbacks received, corruption, and abuse in reconstruction contracts across numerous sectors and throughout the country,⁸² it is clear that privatization remains fraught with risks and represents significant benefits to

⁷⁹ "Here's Exactly How Much the US Has Spent on the War In Afghanistan — So Far, Task and Purpose," 1 August 2017. <https://taskandpurpose.com/war-afghanistan-us-spending-cost/>

⁸⁰ "NATO in Afghanistan: Private military contractors are 'out of the question'," Deutsche Welle. 9 October 2018. <https://www.dw.com/en/nato-in-afghanistan-private-military-contractors-are-out-of-the-question/a-45811796>

⁸¹ "Contractor Support of U.S. Operations in The US CENTCOM Area of Responsibility," Report for 4th quarter Fiscal Year 2018. ODASD (Logistics), October 2018. https://www.acq.osd.mil/log/ps/CENTCOM_reports.html/5A_October_2018.pdf

⁸² Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) Quarterly Report to the United States Congress. 30 July 2018. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-07-30qr.pdf>

those aiming to exploit the already fragile security and economic system in the country, at the expense of Afghan populations.

III. Peace and Reconciliation Efforts

The meaning of peace and reconciliation for Afghan communities today, in light of ongoing violence and economic dependency, is difficult to specify. Economic development and employment opportunities, as well as alleviation of poverty, are inextricably linked to progress toward stabilization of the country and sustainable peace. As one expert notes:

Given the complexity of Afghanistan's problems and the international intervention, there is a risk of compartmentalization between security, political, diplomatic, and development spheres. Beyond coordination issues and working at cross-purposes on the ground in Afghanistan, there is also a risk of compartmentalization at the periodic high-profile international meetings on Afghanistan, which have been bifurcated between security summits (held by NATO) and development conferences.⁸³

Currently, however, the population perceives that decision-makers are, according to several interviews with civilians, "looking more [toward] temporary solutions for each and everything," rather than comprehensive and sustainable ways forward. Indeed, in recent years, community divisions have become more visible, as evidenced by decisions made that are based more on individual agendas and alliance interests. In the words of one interviewee, "Each group is now a competitor in this process, so it is complicated to draw a road map to peace... Criminals do not have incentive to move toward peace. Peace is a hard topic."

Prior to the targeted violence around the elections in October 2018, which this report discusses in a later section, increased attention to a possible peace process in summer 2018 generated hope. The government of Afghanistan has taken incremental steps through the organization of meetings, such as the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation, which presented a comprehensive proposal for direct peace talks with the Taliban, without preconditions. As one report notes:

President Ashraf Ghani offered the group unconditional talks...[and] offered the Taliban an unconditional cease-fire to coincide with the Islamic holy month of Ramadan... [The Taliban] accepted the offer and ordered its fighters to lay down their weapons for three days. The effectiveness of the truce—as well as the

⁸³ "Afghanistan's Economic Development Hinges on the Peace Process: Security and political dynamics should be integrated into Afghanistan's development agenda at Geneva," William Byrd. 4 September 2018. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2018/09/afghanistans-economic-development-hinges-peace-process>

resumption of the fighting after Eid—signaled just how much control the Taliban has over its fighters and the Afghan government over its forces.⁸⁴

Some have argued, however, that the ceasefire was emblematic of larger issues around the peace process in that there was an appetite for small, short-term gains, a lack of consultation with other levels of the government (such as the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and, ultimately, according to a government analyst, this was more of a media coup than a lived reality. Indeed, as the report mentioned above also states:

[P]ast optimism about Afghanistan has given way to a bitter reality...[Historically,] there have been informal conversations involving the U.S. and the Taliban since the presidency of George W. Bush. During the Obama years, the U.S. held direct talks with the Taliban, but those talks ended as divisions among the militants over the strategy became apparent. The Obama administration's relationship with Hamid Karzai, who was the Afghan president at the time, was also complicated...There is distrust among the parties as well as skepticism within them. Any high-profile Taliban attack in Kabul would almost certainly derail a nascent peace process...Hard-liners on both sides are resisting the idea of talks.⁸⁵

Until now, the Taliban has engaged in two sets of talks directly with the U.S., the latest of which took place in Doha with the Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad. As reported by *The New York Times*, the Taliban have requested direct meetings with the Americans instead of dealing with the Afghan authorities, a dimension of the process that has deepened divisions and distrust between the two parties, and according to *The New York Times*, "has made Afghan leaders wary of being side-lined."⁸⁶ The intention of these talks, according to the Americans, is to have preliminary discussions with the Taliban, in advance of any further talks with Afghan authorities. For the time being, however, the Taliban has rejected direct talks with the Afghan government.

The Taliban's demands remain the same as those made in the past: withdrawal of foreign military presence, removal of the Taliban from counterterror/sanctions lists, and an end to the occupation of Afghanistan. Despite ongoing talks and the conditions set out for peace, the Taliban remains strongly opposed to the current government and, as the recent elections violence demonstrates, has privileged violence and instability over meaningful and consequential steps in a peace dialogue. What remains uncertain is the Taliban's vision, as a movement, for inclusive peace apart from their motivations to establish an Islamic State in Afghanistan. At this stage, no concrete plan or mechanisms around building a peace process have been presented. According to one interviewee, "There are messengers of the Taliban in the government that carry their views and priorities, in particular on economy and

⁸⁴ "'A Sudden Burst of Movement' on the Afghan Peace Process." *The Atlantic*. 26 July 2018.

<https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2018/07/sudden-burst-movement-afghan-peace-process/150065/>

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ "US Officials Meet with Taliban Again as Trump Pushes Afghan Peace Process," *New York Times*. 13 October 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/13/world/asia/us-talks-taliban-afghanistan.html>

education, they also have a presence in the High Peace Council (HPC). But all is connected first to the departure of the international occupying military forces.”

Most recently, the Taliban has agreed to be present in Moscow for another series of discussions, this time with a number of state actors, including Pakistan, Iran, China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. While neither the Afghan government nor the U.S. will be present at these multilateral talks, the HPC will be represented. Taliban spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, indicated that the talks are “not about negotiating with any particular side, rather it is a conference about holding comprehensive discussions on finding a peaceful solution to the Afghan quandary and ending the American occupation.”⁸⁷

There have been significant efforts dedicated to analysis and research on perceptions of peace in Afghanistan. On the one hand, analysis undertaken by the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN) in particular, has noted that many believe that peace with the Taliban is possible and the Pashtun community has also been supporting long-term reconciliation. On the other hand, however, there has been a significant degree of dissatisfaction with the limited progress of the talks. Furthermore, there are increased fears about the outcomes of these talks, if they are not inclusive. This is particularly the case for women, who fear that compromises made through dialogue with the Taliban may lead to further societal restrictions and violence and risk fragilizing the rights and freedoms gained since 2002. As one interviewee stated, “The more you are educated, the less you want to promote compromises with the Taliban.” While there has been some inclusiveness around peace, this remains disconnected, between the international community, local communities, and the Taliban, for example. One interviewee reflected, “Whenever the situation is chaotic, the negotiations are on-going and will continue. Local dialogue exists and it can offer some interesting and unexpected results. Whatever the issue is, Afghans should think of their own solutions. There is no long-term solution from abroad in supporting internal talks.” Despite support for peace negotiations, many Afghans feel that peace will reduce the interest in international support for Afghanistan, leading to a reduction of the necessary funding to protect and improve human rights implementation.

Following the two rounds of talks, the Taliban selected five people to join the negotiating team in Qatar. These senior leaders of the armed group were released from Guantanamo Bay in late October 2018 to join the Taliban’s political office in Doha, signaling steps forward in the peace negotiations. This representation “indicates that the Taliban are forming their political structure ahead of further talks and possible future negotiations,” said the official Afghan government body designated to handle talks with the Taliban.⁸⁸ He also stated, “This is a positive move, a sign that all sides are getting serious about a possible peace

⁸⁷ “Taliban says Moscow Meeting Not About Afghan Peace Talks,” VOA News. 6 November 2018. <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-says-moscow-meeting-not-about-afghan-peace-talks/4646821.html>

⁸⁸ “‘Taliban Five,’ Once Held at Guantanamo, Join Insurgency’s Political Office in Qatar,” Wall Street Journal. 30 October 2018. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/taliban-five-once-held-at-guantanamo-join-insurgencys-political-office-in-qatar-1540890148>

settlement.”⁸⁹ In late September, amidst the talks in Doha, Pakistan claimed that it released Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban’s deputy commander and founding member. Former President Karzai promoted Baradar’s release with the hope that this would prompt peace talks between the Afghan authorities and the Taliban. Pakistan also released Mullah Abdul Samad Sani, also called Samad Sani, another Taliban leader.

While local communities may be ready for peace, at the national and international levels, possibilities remain tenuous. Whereas dialogue occurs among parties in different configurations, weapons proliferation and targeted attacks against civilians continue, straining ambitions and expectations for peace. It is important to note, as one report emphasizes, that Afghanistan currently thrives on:

...a well-established war economy, which fuels and funds violence. Both main parties to the war—the Taliban and the Afghan government—remain determined to fight on and have secured sufficient external backing to do so. Underlying the violence are persistent political disputes over how power is shared and how future reforms are configured.⁹⁰

There is a perception that religious scholars and leaders have been influencing peace talks with the Taliban. In the words of one interviewee, “everybody wants a state run by Islamic principles but without religious soldiers.”

Analysis of the interests and restraint of the dominant interlocutors in these talks—among them, the Afghan authorities, the Taliban, religious leaders, Pakistan, and the United States—is critical to understanding the compromises and opportunities for dialogue. While there are strong arguments in favor of the benefits of a cooperative outcome to peace talks, the pervasive and enduring mistrust between these actors has continued to divide, rather than unite, in these discussions. Despite the benefits, for all sides, of collaborative peace talks, each actor has continued to maintain and leverage its short-term agenda.⁹¹ The 2018 conferences in Tashkent in March⁹² or in Jakarta in May⁹³ didn’t break the cycle of violence, failing to mitigate the impact of spoilers in the peace building process.

⁸⁹ Nadir Naim, deputy chairman of the High Peace Council quoted in “‘Taliban Five,’ Once Held at Guantanamo, Join Insurgency’s Political Office in Qatar,” Wall Street Journal. 30 October 2018. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/taliban-five-once-held-at-guantanamo-join-insurgencys-political-office-in-qatar-1540890148>

⁹⁰ “Incremental peace in Afghanistan,” Accord. June 2018. <https://www.c-r.org/resources/accord-incremental-peace-afghanistan>

⁹¹ “Overcoming the Prisoner’s Dilemma to Reach Peace in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations. 14 September 2018. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/overcoming-prisoners-dilemma-reach-peace-afghanistan>

⁹² “Tashkent Conference Backs Afghan Government’s Peace Offer,” Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 27 March 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-offers-host-talks-taliban-afghanistan/29127849.html>

⁹³ “Jakarta meeting significant for Afghan peace process,” Afghanistan Times. 12 May 2018. <http://www.afghanistantimes.af/jakarta-meeting-significant-afghan-peace-process/>

The international community continually intervenes in all discussions and dialogue around peace, while simultaneously claiming that peace in Afghanistan must be made by and between Afghans. International interference in the dialogue among the parties contributes to the weakness of a consequential peace agenda. As an interviewee indicated, “The international community maintains a force of occupation and entertains many contradictions, in particular the U.K. and the U.S. for example; on the one hand showing their support of the Pakistan military, while promoting peace in Afghanistan on the other.” Moreover, the push by international forces to see a negotiated settlement is based more on their unofficial recognition that seventeen years of ground operations have not succeeded in bringing an urgent end to the conflict. In summary, there is a perception that the international intervention has had a very negative impact on the political situation and the opportunities of dialogue among the parties.

IV. Pervasive Structural Violence in Political, Social, and Economic Systems

In addition to the ongoing conflict and the resulting security and humanitarian implications for civilians, this context analysis examines the types of violence in Afghanistan that emerge from the country’s political, social, and economic systems, leading to endemic social violence, exploitation, and a widespread impunity. While these elements significantly impact the country’s capacity to emerge out of conflict, it should not be presumed that stabilizing armed conflict will necessarily reduce other forms of violence, particularly if the incentives to sustain informal economies and exploitative practices remain.

A. Government Malfunction

There is a tendency to oversimplify and rationalize the dysfunction of the Afghan government in terms of international interference, conflicting political agendas, persistent conflict, and inadequate funding. However, amidst these layers of political complexity, and living through the consequences of this pervasive dysfunction, it is widely believed that Afghans today have been “abandoned” by their politicians and can do “better” than their leaders, according to interviews. There is little trust in the elite’s capacity to define the priorities and direction for Afghanistan and little belief that the government is fundamentally invested in Afghanistan’s emergence out of this protracted state of conflicts. The most vulnerable—including minorities, refugees, displaced populations, those jobless and without access to basic security and services—suffer most under this burden of dysfunction.

Many Afghans do not perceive the central authority in Kabul to be aware of, or concerned with, the daily realities of life in conflict.⁹⁴ Rather, there is a perception that the central authorities are staying safely behind closed doors, trying to maintain their positions of

⁹⁴ See generally, “Afghanistan in 2016: A Survey of the Afghan People,” The Asia Foundation. 2016. https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/2016_Survey-of-the-Afghan-People_full-survey.Apr2017.pdf. See also generally, Siân Herbert, “State legitimacy in Afghanistan and the role of the international community,” October 2014. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a089a5e5274a31e00001cc/hdq1068.pdf>

power and influence, engaging with international powers imposing their agendas over the country, and discussing the challenges of Afghanistan only in international fora. However, what remains visible is that high-level decisions are taken by a select group of elites and that President Ghani privileges a centralized system in order to ensure the continuity of his leadership. The legitimacy of the 2014 presidential elections, after which President Ghani took office, was met with strong opposition from Abdullah Abdullah, former Minister of Foreign Affairs. He assumed the position of Chief Executive in a power-sharing deal with Ghani after an election process fraught with discrepancies.

In the ministries, the inertia and lack of political will to visit rural districts, to assess the needs and security of the country as a whole, along with the avoidance to take risks that could destabilize their individual positions in power discredits the administration as a whole. Local populations also consider members of parliament to be ineffective, constituting a component of large-scale networks of corruption and impunity. Lack of adequately allocated resources, poor monitoring, and distrust from local populations all contribute to a cycle of disabled programming for vulnerable populations, discouragement around the possibilities for real peace, and an ambivalent perception of international presence, and its heavy and questionable footprint on stabilization and development.⁹⁵

After the fall of the Taliban at the end of 2001, the re-establishment of a strong and visible central authority, equipped with a broad spectrum of prerogatives and mechanisms to ensure accountability and protections for the people of Afghanistan, raised expectations among the local and international communities about the potential of the new Afghan government. In reality, the Karzai presidency fell short of Afghan hopes and ambitions, while international interventions along a number of sectors across the country (including security, military, the economy, and development) supplemented programming and priorities that should have been undertaken by the central government.⁹⁶ This method of piecemeal substitution not only gave the illusion of coherent state functioning but also became a catalyst for the systematic and widespread corruption that plagues Afghanistan today, making it the fourth most corrupt country in the world in 2017, after Syria, South Sudan, and Somalia, according to Transparency International's annual Corruption

⁹⁵ For more on how governmental service delivery depends on networks of access, see the following articles: "Politics over evidence: questioning the link between service delivery and state legitimacy in Afghanistan," <https://securelivelihoods.org/wp-content/uploads/Afghanistan-briefing-paper-2-Orzala-draft-CS6.pdf>; "Transforming Afghanistan? Seeking coherence between technical solutions and political processes: lessons from the field," <https://securelivelihoods.org/wp-content/uploads/Transforming-Afghanistan-Seeking-coherence-between-technical-solutions-and-political-processes-lessons-from-the-field.pdf>; "Seeing like the networked state: Subnational governance in Afghanistan," https://securelivelihoods.org/wp-content/uploads/RR12-Seeing-like-the-networked-state_Subnational-governance-in-Afghanistan.pdf; and "The rules of the game: towards a theory of networks of access," https://securelivelihoods.org/wp-content/uploads/BP19-The-rules-of-the-game_Towards-a-theory-of-networks-of-access.pdf

⁹⁶ On aid dependency, see: Jonathan Goodhand, "Aiding violence or building peace? The role of international aid in Afghanistan," 2002.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0143659022000028620>

Perceptions Index.⁹⁷ The level of corruption at the governmental level is estimated by unofficial sources, as indicated by an interviewee, at more than \$3 billion per year.

In a statement made in 2017, UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Tadamichi Yamamoto, stated that “without enhanced efforts by the National Unity Government to increase political inclusiveness, strengthen accountability, and improve the Government's credibility, particularly in the security sector, we are likely to face more crises in an increasingly fragile environment.”⁹⁸ Today, the central authority has a limited view on the realities of Afghans and little inclination to end violence and prompt change, even if they had the capacity. Throughout the country, national unity and national laws are frail due to conflicting clan relationships. Feudalism and local ancestral governance prevail but, as one interviewee stated, “at least there is a local shared code of conduct and laws.” President Ghani asserted that “we can and we should be doing what we can,” but this remains insufficient in light of the multitude of challenges facing the country. In order to rationalize its failures, the government explains that scarcity of resources and limited funding are the cause of dysfunction and an inability to deliver basic services adequately. However, with the amount of resources injected into the government, development programming, and the economy, there are other factors to be examined, beginning with the will for tangible change and progress. How can one speak of trust, credibility, and state-building in Afghanistan in the midst of an ongoing conflict, which influential regional and international powers have a central responsibility and benefit in perpetuating? As one interviewee reflected, “There was a large support at the arrival of President Karzai and Ghani, for their capacity to understand, to defend Afghanistan, and to transform the country for good. This support is over, for them and for politicians in general.”

Sixteen years after the re-establishment of a central authority in Afghanistan, the population still does not believe that the government is invested in making peace a reality. Rather, it is seen as reacting, managing, entertaining, or fueling ongoing wars and tensions. For example, in the view of one interviewee, “police officers are not trained to maintain and promote peace but to fight on frontlines.” The priorities and activities of the authorities raise important questions on their level of preparation and willingness to tackle the endemic challenges and malfunctioning of the system, privileging a day-to-day reactive approach, favoring their networks of clientelism, with little forethought as to the longer-term consequences of these approaches, from corruption to violence to failing services and infrastructure. As described by many Afghans, the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Interior, and the NDS do not appear to be working for the security and functioning of the State, its services to the populations, the protection of its people, the enforcement of rule of law, or management of the country's borders, but rather for the security and maintenance of selected interest groups and elites.

⁹⁷ “Annual Corruption Perceptions Index 2017,” Transparency International. February 2018.

https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2017

⁹⁸ Briefing to the United Nations Security Council by the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Mr. Tadamichi Yamamoto. New York. 21 June 2017.

<https://www.un.org/undpa/en/speeches-statements/21062017/afghanistan>

B. The Scourge of Corruption

It has been widely acknowledged by communities that the main driver of dysfunction in the central authority is the pervasive and deeply entrenched systems of corruption and misuse of international funding in the country. According to the UNAMA 2018 Report, “Afghanistan’s Fight Against Corruption: From Strategies to Implementation”:

Corruption has a concrete impact on all citizens of Afghanistan, who are required to pay bribes in nearly every aspect of daily life, and who suffer from inequities in economic and employment opportunities as a result of widespread nepotism and patronage. More fundamentally, the perception of endemic corruption—based, unfortunately, on real experiences as a recent survey demonstrated—has undermined public confidence in Government institutions, which has in turn hindered the pursuit of wider objectives, such as domestic political stability, electoral preparations, and a credible peace process with the armed opposition.⁹⁹

Evidence and perceptions of a “State of corruption” has been regularly documented since 2002 by national entities—including the Human Rights Commission, international analysis,¹⁰⁰ and the Asia Foundation¹⁰¹—describing how those at all levels of government “take their cut.” Since the arrival of President Ghani, combating corruption has become one of the central priorities of the government, and both Ghani and Abdullah ran on anti-corruption platforms. The current agenda for reform includes a framework for the Government to monitor and adapt its practices related to political leadership, security, replacing patronage with merit, prosecution mechanisms, and tracking of financial flows.¹⁰²

This is not the first time that Afghan politicians have claimed to combat corruption. Indeed, as a UNAMA report notes, “The closure of the unsuccessful High Office of Oversight and Anti-Corruption, while welcome, leaves certain legacy issues that need to be addressed...in particular on the future development of other anti-corruption institutions.”¹⁰³ Of course, the “credibility of the commitment of the Government to see through reforms is an unavoidable pre-requisite for the success of anti-corruption efforts.”¹⁰⁴ At the moment, there are far too

⁹⁹ “Afghanistan’s Fight Against Corruption: from Strategies to Implementation,” UNAMA. 2018. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistans-fight-against-corruption-strategies-implementation-may-2018-endari>

¹⁰⁰ “Afghanistan’s Anti-Corruption Efforts: The Afghan Government Has Begun to Implement an Anti-Corruption Strategy, but Significant Problems Must Be Addressed,” May 2018. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/SIGAR-18-51-AR.pdf>

¹⁰¹ “Afghanistan in 2015: A Survey of the Afghan People,” The Asia Foundation. 2015. <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/afghanistan-in-2015-a-survey-of-the-afghan-people/>

¹⁰² “Afghanistan National Strategy for Combatting Corruption,” October 2017. http://mof.gov.af/Content/files/AFG_AntiCorruptionStrategy_Eng_.pdf

¹⁰³ “Afghanistan’s Fight Against Corruption: from Strategies to Implementation,” UNAMA. 2018. https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistans_fight_against_corruption_from_strategies_to_implementation-14_may_2018.pdf

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

many illegal connections and networks to hope for solid and credible governance around this issue.

Reports on such efforts are released regularly, with increased measures and investment in capacity for the Anti-Corruption Justice Center, but all actors involved acknowledge that significant gaps in the institutional, anti-corruption framework remain. Many Afghans in leadership positions, as well as international actors, claim that the current system of financial management and practices considered as corrupt, or complicit with corruption, are largely accepted. According to an Afghan lawyer, "recent attempts to respond to some instances of corruption have continued to target low-level perpetrators without addressing the magnitude of the problem. Thus, either the elites will accommodate the system or challenge the system in order to maintain their benefits, functioning also as spoilers, but with a tie."

Linked inextricably to the question of corruption is the development and management of national budgets. In 2018, the government submitted its national budget to the Parliament, estimated at a total of \$5.2 billion (including a domestic revenue of around \$2 billion and a foreign revenue from aid of more than \$3 billion). This illustrates the continued weakness in the state budgeting process that leads to an inability of the government to budget and spend its funds appropriately and transparently. It also highlights the continued dependency and expectation of foreign financial assistance, making up over half of its national budget. Other challenges in budget design are linked to the highly politicized environment, with "50% of the projects in the 2017 national budget prone to political influence."¹⁰⁵

Furthermore, important reforms, such as provincial budgeting policies and procedures have been systematically obstructed by rejections of the national budget. Projects are seen as vulnerable to political influences, limited capacity of civil servants, lack of public inclusiveness, and centralization of budgeting and procurement. For example, there are countless cases of politicians pressuring ministers to allocate resources to particular districts or neighborhoods, receiving a portion of a budget as a form of patronage, or offering contracts to relatives and friends. These practices leave room for widespread exploitation and abuse, creating significant bureaucratic complications and weaknesses in daily functioning.

One emblematic illustration of the levels of corruption impacting the Afghan population is the problem of corruption in education at all levels.¹⁰⁶ Analysts found corruption at the

¹⁰⁵ "The Game of Numbers: Analysis of the National Budget," Integrity Watch International, 2018. https://iwaweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/IWA__National-Budget__English_6.pdf

¹⁰⁶ See generally, "Education, an Ideal Corrupted: An assessment of Afghanistan's Ministry of Education," <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/education-an-ideal-corrupted-an-assessment-of-afghanistans-ministry-of-education/>; "A New Push is on for Afghan Schools, but the Numbers Are Grim," <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/01/world/asia/afghanistan-schools-taliban.html>; "Where's the aid money gone? Afghan girls' struggle for education," <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/aid-money-afghan-girls-struggle-education-180606134316480.html>; "Education and Anti-corruption: A Case Study,"

community school level (including bribes to modify grades and school certifications) all the way up to the ministerial level (corruption in planning for school constructions and textbook distributions).¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, there was widespread acknowledgment that hiring of teachers is undertaken not on the basis of credentials or merit, but rather, on the basis of influence, nepotism, and bribery. The first victims of this system of corruption are children and families who not only have lost their potential in adequate education but also have lost faith in the education system. One interviewee reflected, “a suicide attack isn’t the most dangerous thing for us, because a few people will die—Afghan mothers will have other children. It is the unprofessional and unknowledgeable teachers that are most dangerous for us because they kill the future of Afghanistan.”

C. Rule of Law, Human Rights, and Widespread Impunity

The dramatic decline in security, as well as increased political and economic volatility—yielding bleak prospects for peace—have had a damaging influence on the enforcement of rule of law and human rights for Afghans. The enforcement and accountability of human rights, in particular, has been an important marker to measure the progress of the country, particularly after the Taliban regime between 1996 and 2001. According to a teacher, “however limited, rights of women, children, and detainees, but also tools and mechanisms to investigate violations of human rights, have been pursued via civil society and advocacy initiatives, along with more inclusive and rights-based approaches to national programming.”

On the one hand, the adoption of a new Penal Code has demonstrated incremental steps toward improving human rights and providing accountability and redress measures for victims, with the inclusion of anti-torture legislation, child abuse protection (especially for boys), and protections for victims of sexual and gender-based violence (which were subsequently removed under the pressure of conservative opponents).¹⁰⁸ However, these adjustments have been seen as largely cosmetic and have not diminished cases of abuse, exploitation, or torture. Furthermore, human rights activists, women’s advocates, and journalists continue to face harassment, threats, and violence. Reports have indicated regression on issues such as girls’ access to education after grade 6 in numerous provinces (as a result of Taliban pressures in at least twelve provinces), and the right to education for all remains under threat, affecting six to seven million children attending school in insecure areas.

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has noted that, while there has been a decision from the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to initiate investigations in Afghanistan, “the few cases dated after 2003 on which the

<https://www.baag.org.uk/sites/www.baag.org.uk/files/resources/attachments/2017-04-04-Education-and-Anti-corruption-A-Case-Study.pdf>

¹⁰⁷ “Education, an Ideal Corrupted: An assessment of Afghanistan’s Ministry of Education,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, October 2017. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/education-an-ideal-corrupted-an-assessment-of-afghanistans-ministry-of-education/>

¹⁰⁸ See generally the Youth Health and Development Organization, www.yhdo.org

Court could investigate and possibly adjudicate may not be sufficient to satisfy the expectations of many Afghans for justice. Complementary initiatives at the national level are therefore required.”¹⁰⁹

Encouraged by the UN, the Independent Human Rights Commission and the Afghan High Peace Council also participate in regular dialogue with civil society. However, it is widely agreed that the capacity to implement and enforce national laws is not effective, and consequently, there are not guarantees for people to work, move, and live safely throughout the country, particularly in light of the overwhelming insecurity. One interviewee stated that, as far as “capacity building, the rule of law is a fiasco...there is a lack of will to measure the impact of the funding given to implement the rule of law,” particularly relative to its effectiveness for civilians.

Local perceptions indicate that the international community’s efforts with regards to the implementation of rule of law, human rights, and the rights of women and minorities have not been impactful. Abuses continue to negatively impact communities and their security, with exploitation and money driving spoilers, contractors, and private militia. Indeed, there is a perception that the international community’s efforts to address these issues have been insufficient. In the words of one official belonging to the Independent Human Rights Commission and the Afghan High Peace Council interviewed, “in this vacuum of rule of law implementation, impunity has found a comfortable mold, everyone can be victim of anyone in power.” Another interviewee recalled the example of an MP who ordered the killing of a neighbor for wanting to dig a well near his home. Interviewees described a climate of rampant impunity, without remorse or “shame to act badly, to take money, to misuse public goods.”

D. Voiceless Civil Society

Afghans maintain a strong hope in democracy, including in rural areas, where traditional values are predominant. As insecurity remains a central concern, autonomy of livelihoods and freedom of movement are essential. A striking tension at the provincial and district levels exists between, on the one hand, the local aspiration to run, develop, and claim initiatives, and on the other hand, the reality of constraints, limited opportunities, threats, insecurity, and spoilers. Ultimately, local populations strive to be empowered, to generate and promote new ideas, and to be included in processes that will positively impact the country, both in the public and the private sectors, all with the hope to play a role in the rebuilding of their country.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ “Situation of human rights in Afghanistan and technical assistance achievements in the field of human rights,” Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. 21 February 2018. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/situation-human-rights-afghanistan-and-technical-assistance-achievements-field-0>. See also <https://justiceinconflict.org/2018/09/26/afghans-dont-know-the-icc-but-its-hope-to-deliver-justice-depends-on-making-sure-they-do/>

¹¹⁰ See generally, “Challenges Facing Civil Society in Afghanistan,” <http://politicalcritique.org/world/2017/civil-society-afghanistan/>; “CSOs in Afghanistan: How Civil Society Is Flourishing,” <https://www.borgenmagazine.com/csos-in-afghanistan/>; “Afghanistan and

Civil society's expectations remain focused on the basics: access to food, potable water, and electricity, free access to goods in the markets, security, and a reliable justice system. Today, civilians remain trapped in a very violent daily reality, including use of torture in detention facilities, arbitrary killings, and persistent abuses without avenues for recourse. The political environment of corruption and exploitation has marginalized civil society, and has dampened communities' ambitions for engagement and demands. "There is no space to share power with civilians at the local level," one interviewee attested, and no connection of communities to elites in power or local governing mechanisms. As a consequence, there is a lack of accountability, a diffusion of responsibility, and a widespread sentiment that, in light of these systems of abuse, "taking care of Afghanistan is dangerous, in particular for Afghans," according to an interviewee.

E. Political Credibility and Electoral Fragility

October has shown a severe acceleration in targeted violent attacks surrounding the preparation for the elections on October 20, 2018. In a statement on October 8, Taliban representatives stated that "while representing the people and as an emancipative force of the nation, [it] considers this [election] process a fake one as a conspiracy of deceiving the people for achieving the malicious interests of foreigners."¹¹¹ According to the *Washington Post*, and supported by daily news of attacks and civilian casualties, this "warning coincides with an increase in the number of attacks both by the Taliban and affiliates of the Islamic State in recent months, which have killed hundreds of people, including six nominees for the parliamentary vote and scores working on the elections."¹¹² Reports have widely indicated that the Taliban have been targeting candidates, civilians, and election-related facilities, such as hospitals, schools, and mosques, which are also commonly utilized civilian centers.

In 2018, between January 1 and September 30, UNAMA recorded 366 civilian casualties (126 deaths and 240 injured) from election-related violence, particularly targeting national identification distribution centers, voter registration sites, election personnel, and Afghan National Police officers.¹¹³ Between April and June alone, more than 20 security incidents killed 86 persons and injured 185.¹¹⁴ There are also documented abductions of civilians and a

Civil Society," <https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/1765-afghanistan-and-civil-society.pdf>; "Can civil society save Afghanistan?" <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/08/16/can-civil-society-save-afghanistan/>; and "Civil Society in Afghanistan: a decade of progress and challenges" <https://www.peaceinsight.org/blog/2012/12/civil-society-afghanistan/>

¹¹¹ "Taliban breaks silence and condemns upcoming Afghan elections, threatening interference," *Washington Post*. 8 October 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/taliban-break-silence-and-condemn-upcoming-afghan-elections-promising-interference/2018/10/08/4c331cf4-cac9-11e8-920f-dd52e1ae4570_story.html

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ "Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict 2018 quarterly report," UNAMA. 10 October 2018. https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_3rd_quarter_report_2018_10_oct.pdf

¹¹⁴ For example, the attack in Kabul that killed 60 people and injured 13. "Afghanistan: Kabul voter centre suicide attack kills 57," BBC. 22 April 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43855884>

series of incidents involving threats, intimidation, and harassment. Exercising the right to support elections and to vote without fear or insecurity is not a reality for Afghan communities, although news reports highlighted the high turnout for the elections.¹¹⁵

Furthermore, as stated in the recent UNAMA report on electoral violence, from the beginning of the voter registration on April 14, 2018, through the campaign period and two days of silence ending on October 20:

UNAMA verified 152 election-related security incidents resulting in 496 civilian casualties (156 deaths and 340 injured) and the abduction of 245 civilians. Women and children comprised 35 per cent of these civilian casualties. Two deadly attacks on 22 April 2018 in Kabul city and on 6 May 2018 in Khost city resulted in more than 250 civilian casualties alone. Among the total civilian casualties verified by UNAMA, 87 civilian casualties (38 deaths and 49 injured) resulted from attacks against parliamentary candidates, including eight candidates killed.¹¹⁶

During summer 2018, estimates indicate that there were more than 7 million voters registered. An additional element in the electoral process is the buying of votes. According to Afghans, votes can be purchased at the price of \$70 in Kabul. While in parallel, and further complicating the election climate, is the rift between parties of the government and allegations that President Ghani has been seeking to manipulate election results to consolidate his power for his upcoming re-election. A narrative has emerged that “anti-Ghani” is “anti-national,” creating new nationalist tensions and divisions around the elections. Others perceive that implementing the Western political model has contributed to the revival of warlords and bolstered the power of radical factions.

The elections in autumn 2018 also sparked renewed violence by the Taliban and Islamic State, which explicitly promoted the targeting of civilians and authorities in the run up to the “foreign-imposed” election process. The text box below represents a selected chronology of the electoral violence over the course of a few days in October, as reported by interviewees and journalists in Afghanistan interviewed for this report. The intensity of this violence was reported widely in traditional and social media sources, demonstrating the deliberately disruptive intentions of the Taliban in these elections. In anticipation of this violence, as was reported in *The New York Times*, nearly 70,000 members of security forces were deployed in preparation for, and during, the elections. Estimates suggest that thirty to forty Afghan service members were killed daily, and at least “10 candidates and dozens of their supporters have been killed in attacks.”¹¹⁷ Checkpoints and road closures limited community access to polling sites and explosions were reported daily in numerous districts

¹¹⁵ See: <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-high-turnout-for-election-refutes-taliban-narrative/29557767.html>

¹¹⁶ “Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: Special Report: 2018 Elections Violence,” UNAMA. November 2018. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-protection-civilians-armed-conflict-special-report-2018-elections>

¹¹⁷ “Afghanistan Votes for Parliament Under Shadow of Taliban Violence,” *New York Times*. 20 October 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/20/world/asia/afghanistan-election-vote.html>

of the country. Some 474 people were also wounded throughout Afghanistan on the day of parliamentary elections. Although authorities did not provide an official breakdown, most of the victims were civilians. Based on reporting by *The New York Times*, clashes between security forces and Taliban fighters spread to nineteen provinces.”¹¹⁸

Selected incidents of October 2018 electoral violence

17 October 2018

- Explosion targeting Parliament Member Jabbar Qahraman, in Helmand Province, in his office. He was later confirmed as dead.
- Explosion confirmed from a vehicle rigged as a VBIED targeting a passing ANSF convoy. At the time of the report, 15 ANSF members were confirmed killed. After this explosion, 100 – 150 AOG members initiated an attack on the Chak DAC with SAF and heavy weapons in the area.
- Taliban released statement “ordering” teachers and schools to refuse usage of their facilities as polling stations, because the NSAG did not want to “harm” school officials in their attacks (signaling that schools and polling stations will be targeted).
- IMF attack in Bagram district. Taliban claimed to have killed six American soldiers and wounded four others.

18 October 2018

- Gunfire reported inside the Governor’s office in Kandahar, where a meeting was being held between IMF and senior officials of Kandahar leadership. It was reported that Chief of Police, General Razeq was killed. Among the casualties are also Behbud, the head of the NDS, and Provincial Governor Zalmay Weesa. This attack was claimed officially by the IEA. The Governor was officially confirmed as dead.

19 October 2018

- Afghanistan’s election commission advised the government to postpone parliamentary elections in Kandahar following this attack.

20 October 2018

- INSO alerted of violence between 8h50 and 8h55 in Uruzgan Province, Parwan Province, Nimroz Provinces, as well as an explosion in Kapisa Province, rocket attack in Kabul City, and upwards of 21 blasts in Kabul alone.
- Afghan security forces arrested 2 men in a vehicle full of explosives in Kabul.
- Taliban claimed 166 attacks targeting elections. Minister of Interior Wais Barmak stated that 192 security incidents were reported country-wide, along with 1,700 threats.
- Taliban arrested nearly 70 per cent of election commission in Baghlan. In other villages, community members reported reading messages by Taliban on walls “if you vote, we will cut your hands.”

F. Economy

The extreme insecurity in Afghanistan has greatly diminished employment opportunities, as well as the overall prosperity of the economy.¹¹⁹ Despite the fact that USAID, for example, has disbursed over \$1.2 billion for economic growth programs during the past decade,¹²⁰ Afghanistan ranks 183rd out of 190 economies worldwide and nearly last in the main pillars of the economy in terms of construction, real estate, electricity infrastructure, enforcing contracts, and supporting local initiatives and investments.¹²¹ According to analysis by the AAN,

The Oxfam/[Swedish Committee for Afghanistan] report also provides an overview and analysis of development and humanitarian aid to Afghanistan during the period 2010 to 2015 that equalled 34.3 billion USD, [part of a total of development aid assistance slightly over 61 billion US dollars in actual disbursements]...[financial experts] estimate that the country received more than double that amount in military support over the same period; the exact figure is not in the public domain.¹²²

Afghanistan also has a massive trade deficit.¹²³ Despite many evaluations of the country's economy, "15 from USAID in the past two years" according to a senior advisor at the Ministry of Economy, there is not a clear analysis on market-based solutions, the role of the private sector to boost the economy, or prospects for jobs opportunities. In spite of various initiatives, such as a gas pipeline that has been inaugurated in Herat, a perception pervades that Afghanistan remains a limited economic partner. One businessman in Kabul explained during an interview that, "in the winter, Afghanistan imports the fruits it sold to Iran during the spring and summer...We are not armed and prepared to be competitive in the sub

¹¹⁹ See "Afghanistan: A Political Economy Analysis," Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. 2017.

https://brage.bibsys.no/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2470515/NUPI_rapport_Afghanistan_Strand_Borchgrevink_BergHarpviken.pdf?sequence=2. See also, "Afghanistan's opium production is through the roof—why Washington shouldn't overreact," Brookings Institution. 2017

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/11/21/afghanistans-opium-production-is-through-the-roof-why-washington-shouldnt-overreact/>; and "Investment in infrastructure and employment in Afghanistan: Review of past and present investment plans," International Alert. February 2018 https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Afghanistan_InvestmentInInfrastructureEmployment_EN_2018.pdf

¹²⁰ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction Quarterly Report to the United States Congress," April 2018. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-04-30qr.pdf>

¹²¹ "Doing Business 2018," World Bank.

<http://www.doingbusiness.org/content/dam/doingBusiness/media/Annual-Reports/English/DB2018-Full-Report.pdf>

¹²² "The State of Aid and Poverty in 2018: A new look at aid effectiveness in Afghanistan," Afghanistan Analysts Network. 17 May 2018. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-state-of-aid-and-poverty-in-2018-a-new-look-at-aid-effectiveness-in-afghanistan/>

¹²³ Data on balance of trade in Afghanistan, "Afghanistan Balance of Trade," <https://tradingeconomics.com/afghanistan/balance-of-trade>

region.” Indeed, regional perceptions are that Afghanistan remains disorganized, fragile, and underdeveloped, apart from the liability of persistent conflict.

The thriving of illegal business also puts pressure on local traditional markets. Several local and international economic analysts interviewed indicated that more than half of the economy in Afghanistan is directly or indirectly linked to narcotics production and trade. The re-emergence of opium production in Afghanistan has been largely documented during the past years, with alarming reports on the risks it carries for the economy, Afghan society more broadly, and the functioning of the State. The Afghan government and the international community have spent more than \$8.5 billion over the past sixteen years to eradicate opium cultivation and its trade, with no real success. Moreover, since 2008, \$30 million has been dispersed by USAID to build the capacities of the Ministry of Counter Narcotics, raising questions about the Ministry’s competence, encompassing issues related to financial reporting, operations, and compliance with laws and regulations. Monitoring and accountability remain virtually non-existent.

Recently, the U.S. has developed a strategy in both interdiction and eradication to counter the cultivation and production of illicit narcotics. This strategy is extremely costly, requiring more than \$26 million per year. In addition, the U.S. also supports a Governor-Led Eradication program that reimburses provincial governors for eradication costs (\$250 per hectare). In 2017, 750 hectares have been eradicated in the thirteen most productive provinces, but this incentive program has cost roughly \$7 million over the recent years, yielding only “minimal impact on curbing opium-poppy cultivation.”¹²⁴

Even if counter-narcotic operations are carried out on daily basis, the seizures of opium products (including heroin, methamphetamine, hashish, MDMA, K-tablets) and the dismantling of manufacturing laboratories will remain marginal in comparison to the scale of yearly production. Indeed, as the SIGAR report notes, “the sum of seizures of opium over nearly a decade would account for little more than 5.1% of the opium produced in Afghanistan in 2017 alone,”¹²⁵ for a total production estimated at 9,000 metric tons and 329,000 hectares for poppy cultivation. It is important to note that, from 2016 to 2017, the production of opium has increased by 88%, and the cultivation of poppy by 63%, calling into question the effectiveness of international policies and efforts thus far.

According to varying surveys, the mass cultivation of poppy and production of opium products has created a culture of addiction.¹²⁶ While most is exported, estimates suggest that, as of 2013, over 1.6 million people within Afghanistan were drug users, with the numbers rising since. According to an Afghan director of a local NGO dedicated to drug addiction, “Today, we can estimate that 15% of the population (approximately 5 million

¹²⁴ “Afghanistan’s Anti-Corruption Efforts: The Afghan Government Has Begun to Implement an Anti-Corruption Strategy, but Significant Problems Must Be Addressed,” SIGAR Report. May 2018. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/SIGAR-18-51-AR.pdf>

¹²⁵ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction Report on Counter Narcotics, April 2018. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-04-30qr-section3-counternarcotics.pdf>

¹²⁶ See generally, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, [https:// www.areu.org.af](https://www.areu.org.af)

people) uses drugs, and the percentage of women and children who use drugs is among the highest worldwide.”

V. Humanitarian Action

Given the complex array of dynamics this report has thus far addressed, the context of Afghanistan represents an emblematic environment demonstrating the obstacles inherent in frontline humanitarian action in terms of the fragilities of international response, as well as the limitations, constraints, and incoherence of long-standing humanitarian presence. Since 2002, attention, efforts, and funds have focused on the rebuilding of Afghanistan, particularly in terms of security, dialogue with the parties, political legitimacy, economic development, and social emancipation, while access of the population to basic services has been stifled. Three important dimensions must be considered in the analysis of the humanitarian needs in this context: chronic poverty¹²⁷; the enduring conflict and its level of violence and pressure on civilian populations; and the environmental degradation related to climate change, exacerbating vulnerability and pushing displacement. Afghan populations remain under-supported, public facilities are still under-developed and ill-adapted, and acute humanitarian needs remain a prominent reality. Moreover, as noted earlier in this report, civilians face targeted attacks and security risks on a daily basis, when traveling, working, and trying to access hospitals and other humanitarian services. Aid actors themselves have also been the target of violent attacks.¹²⁸

A. Legacy and Perceptions of Aid

International actors, NGOs, UN agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and human rights actors have expressed the importance of supporting and empowering Afghans to solve their own problems. Indeed, according to this perspective, aid is a means rather than an end. Yet, many local actors describe humanitarian response in Afghanistan as limited in terms of access and services and lacking in long-term perspective for Afghans. The consequence of operating with a short-term vision for the deployment of humanitarian operations is that actors continue to work in silos, do not trust each other, and are not keen to share analysis and strategies across organizational lines. Critiques have arisen that programming does not reflect the needs in communities. There is also the

¹²⁷ According to the World Bank, in 2016-17, the poverty line was the equivalent of approximately \$1 USD per day. “Between 2011-12 and 2016-17, the national poverty rate increased from 38.3 to 54.5 percent.” See “The latest poverty numbers for Afghanistan: a call to action, not a reason for despair,” The World Bank. May 2018. <http://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/latest-poverty-numbers-afghanistan-call-action-not-reason-despair>

¹²⁸ See “A Strategic Logic of Attacking Aid Workers: Evidence from Violence in Afghanistan” Neil Narang Jessica A. Stanton. <https://academic.oup.com/isq/article-abstract/61/1/38/3821185>; and Aid Worker Security Report 2017 <https://aidworkersecurity.org/sites/default/files/AWSR2017.pdf>; SAVE report – presence and coverage, See pp. 32-36 for Afghanistan, November 2016. http://www.gppi.net/fileadmin/user_upload/media/pub/2016/SAVE__2016__The_effects_of_insecurity_on_humanitarian_coverage.pdf. For a case study on MSF grappling with the insecure nature of the environment see “Afghanistan: Regaining Leverage,” pp. 49-68 in Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed.

dimension that humanitarian actors are wary of perceived connections to political processes. Indeed, for humanitarian actors negotiating access—in particular, with NSAGs, such as the Taliban or the Hezb I Islami—there can be grave risks if perceived to be participating in the “international agenda” for rebuilding the country. Indeed, in Afghanistan, there is widespread mistrust of international agendas as driving the future of the country,¹²⁹ aggravating existing fragmentation of the aid and development systems. Critics of humanitarian action in Afghanistan argue that the model of assistance has retained the same approach since 2001, privileging substitution over building local capacities, with no innovation and severe lack of coordination between humanitarian and development programming. Afghans have described aid agencies as dysfunctional due to limited field relevance and impact, with too few local NGOs empowered to deliver.¹³⁰ One element driving this dynamic is international actors’ perception that local NGOs are too limited in their capacities to operate. As one UN official interviewed for this report explained, “After years of experiences to implement programs with them, we consider that only 10% of local NGOs do really good work.”

B. Provincial Reconstruction Teams

There have been twenty-five Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) under the authority of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization International Security Assistance Force (NATO/ISAF). NATO defines PRTs as “small teams of military and civilian personnel working in Afghanistan’s provinces to provide security for aid works and help humanitarian assistance or reconstruction tasks in areas with ongoing conflict or high levels of insecurity.”¹³¹ This model has become, according to an interviewee, “an integral part of peacekeeping and stability operations” despite critiques of their limited effectiveness, the absence of coordination and strategic communication with humanitarian programs, and PRTs’ emphasis first and foremost on military objectives and priorities. Overall, there has been limited comprehensive evaluation of the PRT program, though perceptions strongly indicate that the experience of the initiative has been a disaster, putting money into the hands of spoilers and weakening relationships with communities. As one interviewee reflected, “This initiative has created a situation around who should control the money and which has supported, first of all, the ‘bad guys’, bringing a kind of poison in monetizing relationships, and loss of control, big money, payment of people, and huge dependency. That’s the way the districts and provinces function today.” Others state that the PRT program has contributed to the multiplication of conflicts between local communities and local governmental structures. It has also militarized the principle of humanitarian aid. In

¹²⁹ “Local Perceptions of Assistance to Afghanistan,” Antonio Donini, 2007.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13533310601114376>

¹³⁰ For more on localization in Afghanistan see: “Localising Aid: Is it Worth the Risk?” ODI. 2013.

<https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8456.pdf>

¹³¹ “Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan – how they arrived and where they are going,” NATO Review.

https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2007/military_civilian_divide/Provincial_Reconstruction_Teams_Afghanistan/EN/index.htm

the words of one interviewee, “PRT’s actions were not sustainable and Afghans are in a worse situation today than before, perhaps in all the recent history of Afghanistan.”

C. Access Challenges

Humanitarian access in the context of Afghanistan has been met with a number of worsening challenges over recent decades, shaped by constant military interventions and a long-term violent security environment that prevails today.¹³² Humanitarian agencies struggle continuously to access areas in which State authority and territorial control is limited, contested, or under the influence of an NSAG.¹³³ Humanitarian actors that have had a presence in Afghanistan since the 1980s and 1990s reflect that opportunities to assist affected populations, understand the context, and interact with communities no longer exist today, despite the level of financial and military investment in the country over the last seventeen years, in particular. In recent years, a “Humanitarian Access Group” (HAG) has been created and revitalized to address the urgent needs of affected populations. An access strategy has been developed and trainings of staff on humanitarian negotiation have taken place, but the actors acknowledge that a strategy is not enough to ensure access and programming at the village, district, and community level. The role of OCHA with regards to access has been described in interviews as limited and reduced due to a lack of resources and increased security concerns. As one practitioner explained, “the HCT [Humanitarian Country Team] doesn’t work, even the RC [Resident Coordinator]/HC [Humanitarian Coordinator] Toby Lanzer stated it.”

Today, humanitarian practitioners estimate that at least 120 districts throughout the country are considered “hard to reach areas.”¹³⁴ As a consequence, there is not a clear understanding of what local populations need and want. Recent analysis has recorded that forty-five districts throughout the country are fully or partially under the control of NSAGs, with another 118 districts under contested control.¹³⁵ Another dimension is the implementation of remote management programs in hard to reach areas, as well as increased reliance on national staff to implement programs and undertake dialogue on the ground, making them particularly vulnerable to harassment, attacks, and manipulation. These approaches, once

¹³² See generally, “Strengthening Principled Humanitarian Response Capacities: Afghanistan: A Case Study,” 2012.

http://www.operationspaix.net/DATA/DOCUMENT/6967~v~Afghanistan__A_Case_Study__Strengthening_Principled_Humanitarian_Response_Capacities.pdf

¹³³ See “Talking to the other side: Humanitarian engagement with the Taliban in Afghanistan,” ODI. December 2012. <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/7968.pdf>

¹³⁴ OCHA defines “hard to reach areas” as those with high insecurity for populations and humanitarian professionals, as well as geographic constraints such as remoteness or terrain that is challenging to navigate. See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-hard-reach-assessment-report-june-2018>

¹³⁵ “Afghanistan Hard to Reach Needs Assessment, Round One,” OCHA. March 2018. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-hard-reach-assessment-round-one-southern-region-march-2018>

leveraged as a last resort in the past, are now commonplace, particularly outside of cities and in remote areas.

The distance between humanitarian actors and communities on the ground, as well as parties to the conflict, has created a challenging negotiation environment. Negotiations are increasingly taking place through intermediaries, with little direct contact and few local relationships, unlike the humanitarian operations of the past.¹³⁶ Today's negotiations privilege quiet and invisible discussions, rather than visible and global advocacy. In these discussions, the rationale of adhering to and leveraging the humanitarian principles has largely diminished, particularly in light of the increasingly marginal space in which humanitarians can truly operate. According to an Afghan official in relation with the humanitarian community, "so many INGOs fall down in taking sides".

The majority of Afghans also perceive that the humanitarian system has failed them. The impartiality and neutrality of actors are questioned on a daily basis by communities, and even the term "humanitarian" today triggers sentiments of manipulation rather than of support. Lines are now blurred between humanitarian, development, government, and military priorities. Most importantly, there is insufficient reflection on how the access of Afghans to services evolves when there is limited to no field presence by humanitarian agencies. The following issues endure as open questions: What is the value of field operations today? How do humanitarian actors strategize and rationalize their actions in light of these limitations? What are the immediate and long-term effects of these decisions on populations?

Approaches to overcoming access challenges: World Food Programme

As described above, accessing hard to reach areas remains one of the most salient and driving challenges of humanitarian operations in Afghanistan. As one interviewee remarked, "access is not free, you have to work for it." It requires significant effort to access populations in remote areas of the country, particularly those controlled by NSAGs. WFP states that it has access in all provinces, but according to a senior staff interviewed, a lesser degree of access in certain hard to reach districts, "80% of 400 districts, despite the increasing control of armed actors." WFP operations today are running mostly under local partners and private companies. The organization has faced a decrease in its budget (from \$260 million to \$80 million), as well as diminishing staff presence (reportedly down to twenty staff members from one hundred). Cash assistance represents 20% of programming. In terms of access negotiations, WFP relies not only on local actors but also on third parties, as well as local communities. The approach is, according to an interviewee: "engage everybody on the ground, even if not politically."

¹³⁶ For a historical overview of humanitarian negotiations with the Taliban, from the 1980s through the mid 2000s, see "Negotiating with the Taliban" in *Humanitarian Diplomacy*, edited by Larry Minear and Hazel Smith. United Nations University Press. 2007.

D. Insecurity and Mitigation

After 2002, international humanitarian staff across agencies have incrementally adapted their behavior and visibility in Afghanistan, leaving the streets, bazaar, and Afghans' houses in search of more security and predictability. One can discern this shift even by agencies that have traditionally stayed very close to communities, such as MSF and the ICRC, which have had to reduce the surface area of their operations over time.¹³⁷ For humanitarians, the volatile security situation has blocked the chance to deploy solid and adapted assistance. They do not travel outside of the main cities, cannot respond accordingly to attacks against civilians, and have the reputation of prioritizing their staff over the civilians affected by conflict. In such an environment, humanitarian action offers very limited proximity to the issues faced by Afghan populations, in particular related to protection, as well as a lack of regular monitoring of vulnerabilities and needs to inform and align humanitarian operations to the needs of communities.

The bunkerization of humanitarian actors—as well as donors, diplomats, and UN personnel—means that these actors are largely invisible, apart from convoys or helicopters. Conversation around a tea in a village and taking the time to listen to and understand the perceptions and the complexities of Afghan daily life in conflict is no longer a reality. Afghan aid workers and analysts have also adapted their presence, becoming more low profile and discreet in their presence and field visits. Even very substantial Afghan analysts and operational actors such as the Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), or The Liaison Office (TLO), which have been known in the past for developing pertinent and impactful programs and analysis are more prudent and limited in their opportunities to implement activities. In Jalalabad, for example, over the recent months, it has been a daily challenge for Afghans to remain and work there. According to a local NGO director, “to visit Taliban controlled areas is a challenge and a risk in terms of security exposure, but to come back from them exposes us to criticisms and pressures from the NDS and police.” In these highly secured operations, the majority of humanitarians now have to travel with armed escorts (this is the case for international NGOs, UN staff, and implementing partners) requiring, in some cases, at least three vehicles for the transport of nine international staff. The total cost of security management for international humanitarian deployment is not known, but according to various heads of agencies interviewed, “it represents more than 25% of the total budget of international assistance in Afghanistan.”

¹³⁷ See “Red Cross to Scale Back in Afghanistan,” National Public Radio. 26 October 2017. <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/10/26/560246121/red-cross-to-scale-back-in-afghanistan>

Operations in the face of insecurity: International Committee of the Red Cross

Despite decades of presence in the country, supporting protection activities and health, the ICRC has faced several security incidents during the past two years that have significantly affected its programs and deployment on the ground to assist the most affected. The attack on one of its orthopedic centers was a significant shock that will take time to comprehend and manage. Similar to MSF, which also suffered from a tragic attack in Badghis in June 2004, it is difficult to clearly read the motivations of the attackers in terms of who was involved and to what extent the organization was directly targeted. The approach today has therefore been to limit the security exposure of international staff and to scale back its operational presence. Field deployment is minimal, and the organization remains in city centers, visiting locations by plane. Despite these setbacks, the ICRC has increased its role and actions for IDPs and the support of clinics in different provinces throughout the country.

E. Coordination Challenges

Coordination remains a significant challenge for agencies, where “everybody wants, yet no one wants coordination,” according to one interviewee. Indeed, the “Kabul Coordination” has been described as a “meeting killer,” with seventy working groups on development and more than forty humanitarian groups meeting on a weekly basis. Frequent turnover of staff also contributes to limited coordination and joint strategies. Programming continues to be done in silos, without adequate monitoring of UN programs and NGOs, (including international and local actors), a dynamic that further entrenches the perceptions that aid is highly politicized and driven by Western agendas. It seems difficult to “do better” when, as explained by an OCHA project manager, “our priorities have been refocused this year, with a budget reduced from \$12 million to \$8 million. There is a perception that the humanitarian sector is part of, and complicit in, a system that has failed Afghan communities for decades, too silent and not performing to the expectations raised by the amount of investment and ambitions.

Although humanitarians have been prompt to denounce corruption at the governmental level, there is also a perception that corruption pervades the humanitarian system as well, due to limited accountability and capacity. Local NGOs remain under-supported and misunderstood. While they may be at greater risk of falling into local corruption mechanisms, they have not been adequately empowered. As one interviewee reflected, “While perhaps important for their own self-image, the ineffectiveness of the ‘Byzantine’ structure of coordination that now exists is a symptom of just how lost the aid community in the country is.” According to various Afghan officials interacting with humanitarians, “No matter how many meetings they arrange, Afghan hearts and minds will not be won until they are able to demonstrate more efficiency and impartiality.”

F. Donors’ Field Visibility

While fragmented, international funding networks and mechanisms in Afghanistan have been increasingly sophisticated since 2002, in terms of the variety of initiatives and entities created to develop governance, build capacities, support functioning, create alternative

development policies, and conduct monitoring. The United States, in particular, has played a role in establishing processes to generate reports, produced by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), demonstrating an effort to chronicle and document funding.

Generally speaking, the main donors continue to generate hypotheses regarding the combination of factors that can lead to economic growth, increased foreign investment, good governance, job opportunities, meaningful gains in education, health and rights, women's empowerment, and global accountability. Yet, these donors also document, on a regular basis, the chronic failures of their investments in light of the worsening conflict and structural breakdowns in the country. The AAN has indicated that "The fragmentation of aid is reflected by the fact that funds for the \$6.659 billion USD Afghan government budget for 2017/8 were provided by over 30 different international donors."¹³⁸ When evoking the opportunity or the possibility of receiving less financial support, according to Afghan civilians interviewed, they have remarked that they do not see what difference it will make, considering [they do not] really benefit from this support thus far. For many Afghans, the aid model is "out of breath" in a conflict environment that has suppressed and constrained it for years. The aid system gives communities a chance to gain time but evidently does not offer a long-term solution for the development of the country or for the strong functioning of the state.¹³⁹

For example, among the large funding support in counter-narcotics initiatives or rural development, as described earlier in this report, in the economic sector, *Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat* (DABS) were invested in (amounting to billions of U.S. dollars). Last year, however, USAID publicly declared that DABS is a "commercially unviable and poorly functioning utility." It is important to examine how and when assessments and decisions regarding continued investment are made. How far can authorities manage and oversee activities? Why has the United States accepted chronic malfunctioning and disruption of support from the authorities? Or does this posture signal a tacit agreement to maintain a grip on Afghanistan's economic and development future?

Elites in power are far removed from local realities. The minimum people expect from their leaders is that, even if they are not doing good for the country and its people, they do not do more harm. Since 2014, Afghanistan has faced a period of decreasing donor investment, and consequently, significant gaps in funding needs. As an interviewee stated, "instead of pushing to run the mechanisms of accountability that are supposed to have been developed for years under the management of international experts, [donors] opened the space for dirty money." Information such as a massive misappropriation in the Ministry of Education, for example, during the past years, do not encourage donors. Furthermore, in their

¹³⁸ "The State of Aid and Poverty in 2018: A new look at aid effectiveness in Afghanistan," Afghanistan Analysts Network. 17 May 2018. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-state-of-aid-and-poverty-in-2018-a-new-look-at-aid-effectiveness-in-afghanistan/>

¹³⁹ See in-depth analysis here: "The State of Aid and Poverty in 2018: A new look at aid effectiveness in Afghanistan," Afghanistan Analysts Network. 17 May 2018. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-state-of-aid-and-poverty-in-2018-a-new-look-at-aid-effectiveness-in-afghanistan/>

cooperation with different branches of the government and ministries related to sectors such as agriculture, health, human rights, and rule of law, donors acknowledge serious concerns about the use of the funding directly allocated to ministries and the tacit acceptance of corruption.

In interviews conducted for this report with key donors, there was a general pessimism regarding their capacity to assist the most vulnerable and to support truly impactful humanitarian projects. Furthermore, donors have limited, or no, tolerance for additional security risks, in particular after the May 2017 attack in the diplomatic quarter in Kabul.¹⁴⁰ Such attacks impact the field presence, visibility, and capacity to act on the long run. Donors today privilege emergency responses in certain areas, rather than multiple programs in varying provinces. “We support actors that do not go everywhere,” said one donor representative in an interview.

As suggested above in the examination of insufficient engagement with local actors, donors have expressed limited trust in local agencies and authorities to conduct programs without diversion of funding. Indeed, the majority of international donors limit their direct financial support to local NGOs and have reportedly created funding mechanisms that bypass the central government. The main reason for this reluctance seems to be that they do not feel convinced that local NGO programming remains less impactful than international activities. Donors also admit, however, that they are increasingly uncomfortable with international NGOs’ expansive projects, with high indirect costs, and a too-limited operational footprint.

G. Failures—and Possibilities—of Development

The development approach in conjunction with—and sometimes in competition with—emergency assistance programming has not brought sufficient changes to capacity, services, and infrastructure to allow local communities to be functional and self-reliant. There are, and have been, during the past years, various initiatives (mainly funded by USAID) to offer development alternatives to illicit business. These initiatives include efforts such as rehabilitating irrigation infrastructures, supporting small market activities, and expanding livelihoods. Examples include the Kandahar Food Zone (KFZ) or the Commercial Horticulture and Agricultural Marketing Program (CHAMP).¹⁴¹ But strengthening farmers’ capacities quickly exposes limits and constraints on mobility in volatile environments that can deteriorate immensely from one month to the next. It is also not sufficient to substitute the profitability of illicit business development, condemning the development programs to the periphery of positive growth for Afghanistan. The government has sharply reduced development spending in its recent budget. As one economist interviewed explained, “the government has been able to spend only around 50% of its development budget in the last 10 years.” Indeed, the past four years have seen significant deterioration and inefficiency of

¹⁴⁰ “Kabul: at least 90 killed by massive car bomb in diplomatic quarter,” The Guardian. 31 May 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/31/huge-explosion-kabul-presidential-palace-afghanistan>

¹⁴¹ Community based agriculture and rural development program that aims to improve household income.

actors, particularly when we consider the significant investment on gender programming over the past decade, while indicators of vulnerability for women and girls are at an all-time high.

Concluding Remarks

The situation today in Afghanistan suggests a state of generalized denial. Indeed, if the levels of violence and political deterioration continue to escalate, the country will enter into a deeper spiral of decay, dependency, and dysfunction, as the international community, Afghan authorities, and non-state actors continue to pursue their independent and conflicting interests at the expense of Afghan communities.¹⁴² For Afghans coping with the daily insecurities and loss of opportunities in the face of chronic conflict, the most damning feature has been a lack of recognition and responsibility for this reality, and indeed, a tacit acceptance to continue to neglect the constrained, wasteful, and ineffective programing that has sustained the country since the U.S. invasion of 2001. As a SIGAR report states, “The U.S. government greatly overestimated its ability to build and reform government institutions in Afghanistan as part of the stabilization strategy,” and that “under immense pressure to quickly stabilize insecure districts, U.S. government agencies spent far too much money, far too quickly, and in a country woefully unprepared to absorb it.”¹⁴³

Thus, the experience in Afghanistan requires a critical perspective on the damage inflicted by years of international dependency and new thinking about possibilities for the country to emerge from crisis and to create new drivers and models for peace. Indeed, it is important to direct efforts toward bolstering local initiatives without hidden security or political agendas. These efforts require leaving the leadership of the country to Afghans in order for them to enter into dialogue and reconciliation processes among themselves and for themselves, setting aside international motivations to align to external agendas, priorities, or values.

Despite conflict, each election period represents new hope for authentic, effective, and protective governance, with functional tools to assess performance and failures, and to limit corrupt and exploitative enterprises. The humanitarian and development communities must critically review the relevance and impact of their programming, the effects and constraints of their operations, and support strongly monitored initiatives, with a time frame and mission to favor coordination, alignment, and local initiatives, to limit competition and complacency, and to empower transformation from dependency to autonomy.

¹⁴² “Overcoming the Prisoner’s Dilemma to Reach Peace in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations. 14 September 2018. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/overcoming-prisoners-dilemma-reach-peace-afghanistan>

¹⁴³ “Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan,” SIGAR-18-48-LL, 5/2018. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-18-48-LL.pdf>